The PRINCESS PASSES

C.N. & A.M. WILLIAMSON

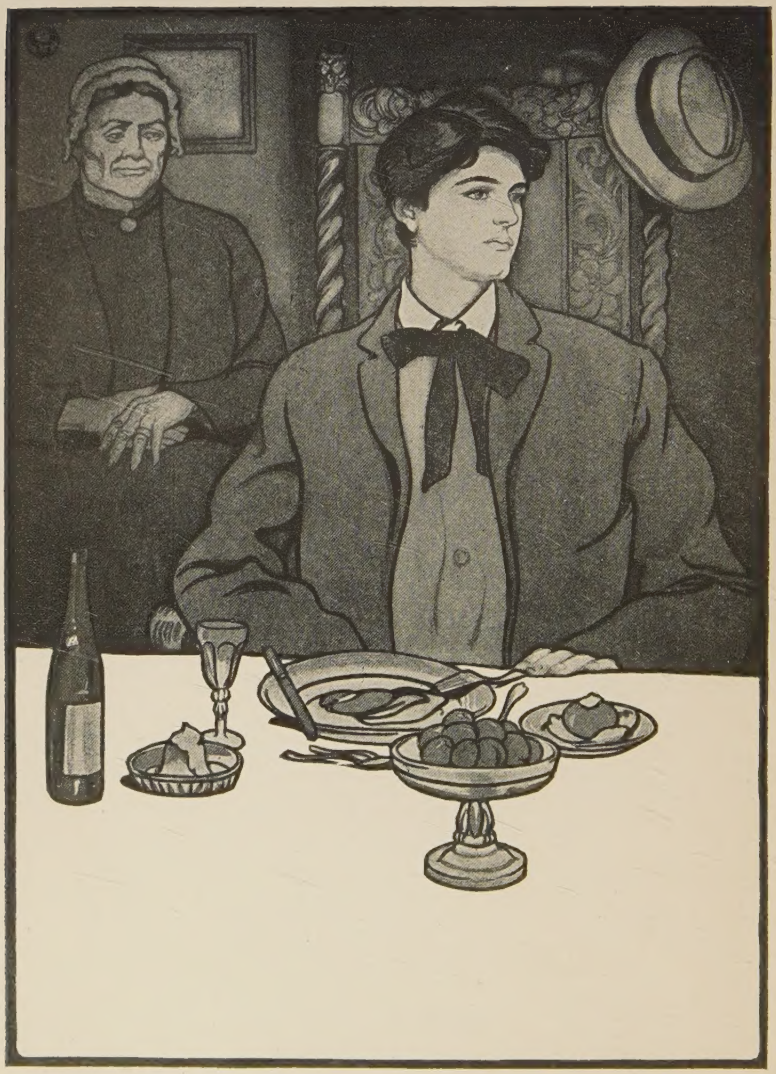
Paul

S. K

Mary & Bartlett

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/princesspasses0000cnam



"FOOD FOR THE GODS, AND ONLY A BOY TO EAT IT."—Page 102.

The Princess Passes

A ROMANCE OF A MOTOR CAR

By C. N. AND A. M. WILLIAMSON

Authors of "The Lightning Conductor," "My Friend the Chauffeur," "The Princess Virginia," etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

A. L. BURT COMPANY, PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1903, 1904
BY
C. N. and A. M. WILLIAMSON

COPYRIGHT, 1905
BY
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

Published March, 1905

TO

Alice Neal

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Woman Disposes	1
II.	Mercédès to the Rescue	12
III.	My Lesson	29
IV.	Pots, Kettles, and Other Things	41
V.	In Search of a Mule	54
VI.	The Wings of the Wind	62
VII.	At Last!	78
VIII.	The Making of a Mystery	88
IX.	The Brat	96
X.	The Scraping of Acquaintance	112
XI.	A Shadow of Night	123
XII.	The Princess	133
XIII.	Afternoon Calls	143
XIV.	The Path of the Moon	158
XV.	Enter the Contessa	176
XVI.	A Man from the Dark	186
XVII.	The Little Game of Flirtation	204
XVIII.	Rank Tyranny	215
XIX.	The Little Rift within the Lute	224
XX.	The Great Paolo	235
XXI.	The Challenge	243
XXII.	An American Custom	252

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIII.	There is No Such Girl	258
XXIV.	The Revenge of the Mountain	272
XXV.	The Americans	294
XXVI.	The Vanishing of the Prince	307
XXVII.	The Strange Mushroom	321
XXVIII.	The World without the Boy	333
XXIX.	The Fairy Prince's Ring	343
XXX.	The Day of Suspense	353
XXXI.	The Boy's Sister	359

THE PRINCESS PASSES

CHAPTER I

Woman Disposes

" Away, away, from men and towns,
To the wild wood and the downs,
To the silent wilderness."
—Percy Bysshe Shelley.

"To your happiness," I said, lifting my glass, and looking the girl in the eyes. She had the grace to blush, which was the least that she could do, for a moment ago she had jilted me.

The way of it was this.

I had met her and her mother the winter before at Davos, where I had been sent after South Africa, and a spell of playing fast and loose with my health —a possession usually treated as we treat the poor, whom we expect to have always with us. Helen Blantock had been the success of her season in London, had paid for her triumphs with a breakdown, and we had stopped at the same hotel.

The girl's reputation as a beauty had marched before her, blowing trumpets. She was the prettiest girl in Davos, as she had been the prettiest in London; and I shared with other normal, self-respecting men the amiable weakness of wishing to monopolise the woman most wanted by others. During the process I fell in love, and Helen was kind.

Lady Blantock, a matron of comfortable rotundity of figure and a placid way of folding plump, white hands, had, however, a contradictorily cold and watchful eye, which I had feared at first; but it had softened for me, and I accepted the omen. In the spring, when my London tyrant had pronounced me "sound as a bell," I had proposed to Helen. The girl said neither yes nor no, but she had eyes and a smile which needed no translation, so I kissed her (it was in a conservatory at a dance) and was happy —for a fortnight.

Then came this bidding to dinner. Lady Blantock wrote the invitation, of course, but it was natural to suppose that she did it to please her daughter. It happened to be my birthday, and I fancied that Helen had kept the date in mind. Besides, the selection of the guests had apparently been made with an eye to my pleasure.

There was Jack Winston, who had lately married an American heiress, not because she was an heiress, but because she was adorable; there was the heiress herself, *née* Molly Randolph, whom I had known through Winston's letters before I saw her lovely, laughing face; there was Sir Horace Jerveyson, the richest grocer in the world, whom I suspected Lady Blantock of actually regarding as a human being, and a suitable successor to the late Sir James. Besides these, there was only myself, Montagu Lane; and I believed that the dinner had been arranged with a view to my claims as leading man in the love drama of which Helen Blantock was leading lady, the other characters in the scene merely being "on" as our "support." If this idea argued conceit, I was punished.

It was with the *entrée* that the blow fell, and I

had a curious, impersonal sort of feeling that on every night to come, should I live for a hundred years, each future *entrée* of each future dinner would recall the sensation of this moment. Something inside me, that was myself yet not myself, chuckled at the thought, and made a note to avoid *entrées*.

We had been asking each others' plans for August. Molly and Jack had said that they were going to Switzerland to try the new Mercédès, which had been given as a wedding present to the girl by a school friend of that name, and of many dollars.

Then, solely to be civil, not because I wanted to know, I asked Sir Horace Jerveyson what he meant to do. Hardly did I even expect to hear his answer, for I was looking at Helen, and she was in great beauty. But the man's words jumped to my ears.

"Miss Blantock and I are going to Scotland," answered the grocer, in his fat voice, which might have been oiled with his own bacon. I stared incredulously. "Together," he informatively added.

Lady Blantock laughed nervously. "I suppose we might as well let this pass for an announcement?" she twittered. "Nell and Sir Horace have been engaged a whole day. It will be in the *Morning Post* to-morrow. Really, it has been so sudden that I feel quite dazed."

It was at this point that I drank to the girl's happiness, looking straight into her eyes.

I have a dim impression that the grocer, who no doubt mistook her blush for maiden pride of conquest, essayed to make a speech, and was tactfully suppressed by the future mother-in-law. I am sure, though, that it was Helen who presently asked, in

pink-and-white confusion, if I, too, were bound for Scotland. "But, of course you are," she added.

"No," I said. "I've been planning to take a walking tour as soon as this tiresome season is over. I shall run across to France and wander for a while. Eventually, I shall end up at Monte Carlo. A friend whom I rather want to meet, will arrive there, at her villa, in October."

I knew that Jack Winston would understand, for he had not been the only one last winter who had written letters. But Jack was of no importance to me at the instant. I was talking at Helen, and she, too, would understand. I hoped that, in understanding, she would suffer a pang, a small, insignificant, poor relation of the pang inflicted upon me.

It is a thing unexplained by science why the miserable hours of our lives should be fifty times the length of happy hours, though stupid clocks, seeing nothing beyond their own hands, record both with the same measurement. If we had sat at this prettily decorated dinner table in the Carlton restaurant (I had thought it pretty at first, so I give it the benefit of the doubt) through the night into the next day, while other people ate breakfast and even luncheon, the moments could not have dragged more heavily. But when it appeared that we must have reached a ripe old age—those of us who had been young with the evening—Lady Blantock thought we might have coffee in the "palm court." We had it, and by rising at last, sweet Molly Winston saved me from doing the musicians a mischief. "Lord Lane, you promised to let us drop you, in the car," she said to me. "Oh, I don't mean to 'drop you' literally. Our auto has no naughty ways. I hope we are not carrying you off too soon."

Too soon! I could have kissed her. "Angel," I murmured, when we were out of the hotel, for in reality there had been no engagement. "Thank you—and good-bye." I wrung her hand, and she gave a funny little squeak, for I had forgotten her rings.

"What! Aren't you coming?" asked Jack.

"We really want you," said Molly. "Please let us take you home with us—to supper."

"We've just finished dinner," I objected weakly.

"That makes no difference. Eating is only an incident of supper. It's a meal which consists of conversation. Look, here's the car. Isn't she a beauty? Can you resist her? Such a dear darling of a girl gave her to me, a girl you would love. Can you resist Mercédès?"

"I could resist anything if I could resist you. But seriously, though you're very good, I think I'll walk to the Albany, and—and go to bed."

"What nonsense! As if you would. You're quite a clever actor, Lord Lane, and might deceive a man, but—I'm a woman. Jack and I want to talk to you about—about that walking tour."

It would have been ungracious to refuse, since she had set her heart upon a rescue. The chauffeur who had brought round the motor surrendered his place to Molly, whom Jack had taught to drive the new car, and I was given the seat of honour beside her. By this time the streets were comparatively clear of traffic, and we shot away as if we had been propelled from a catapult, Molly contriving to combine a rippling flow of words with intricate tricks of steering, in an extraordinary fashion which I would defy any male expert to imitate without committing suicide and murder.

I was a determined enemy of motor cars, as Jack knew, and thus far had avoided treachery to my favourite animal by never setting foot in one. But to-night I was past nice distinctions, and besides, I rather hoped that Molly and her Mercédès would kill me. My nerves were too numb to tell my brain of any remarkable sensations in the new experience, but I remember feeling cheated out of what I had been led to expect when without any tragic event Molly stopped the car before their house in Park Lane—another and bigger wedding present.

It was a brand-new toy bestowed by millionaire Chauncey Randolph on his one fair daughter. Jack and Molly Winston had been married in New York in June (when I would have been best man had it not been for Helen), had spent their honeymoon somewhere in the bride's native country, and had come "home" to England only a little more than a fortnight ago. Jack's father, Lord Brighthelmston, had furnished the house as his gift to the bride, and as he is a famous connoisseur and collector, his taste, combined with Lady Brighthelmston's management, had resulted in perfection. Already I had been taken from cellar to attic and shown everything, so that to-night there was no need to admire.

We went into the dining-room; why, I do not know, unless that sitting round a table in the company of friends opens the heart and loosens the tongue. I have reason to believe that on the table there were things to eat, and especially to drink, but we gave them the cut direct, though I recall vaguely the fizz of soda shooting from the syphon, and afterwards holding a glass in my hand.

"Do you mind my saying what I think of Lady Blantock and her daughter?" inquired Molly, with

the meek sweetness of a coaxing child. "Perhaps I oughtn't, but it would be a relief to my feelings."

"I wonder if it would to mine?" I remarked impersonally, addressing the ancient tapestry on an opposite wall.

"Let's try, and see," persisted Molly. "Calculating Cats! There, it's out. I wouldn't have eaten their old dinner, except to please you. I've known them only thirteen days, but I could have said the same thing when I'd known them thirteen minutes. Indeed, I'm not sure I didn't say it to Jack. Did I, or did I not, Lightning Conductor?"

"You did," replied the person addressed, answering with a smile to the name which he had earned in playing the part of Molly Randolph's chauffeur, in the making of their love story.

"Women always know things about each other —the sort of things the others don't want them to know," Molly went on; "but there's no use in our warning men who think they are in love with Calculating Cats, because they would be certain we were jealous. Of course I shouldn't say this to you, Lord Lane, if you hadn't taken me into your confidence a little—that night of my first London ball."

"It was the night I proposed to Nell," I said, half to myself.

"Sir Horace Jerveyson was at the ball, too."

"Talking to Lady Blantock."

"And looking at Miss Blantock. I noticed, and —I put things together."

"Who would ever have thought of putting those two together?"

"I did. I said to myself and afterwards to Jack—may I tell you what I said?"

"Please do. If it hurts, it will be a counter-irritant."

"Well, Jack had told me such heaps about you, you know, and he'd hinted that, while we were having our great romance on a motor car, you were having one on toboggans and skates at Davos, so I was interested. Then I saw her at the ball, and we were introduced. She was pretty, but—a prize white Persian kitten is pretty; also it has little claws. She liked you, of course, because you're young and good-looking. Besides, her father was knighted only because he discovered a new microbe or something, while you're a 'hearl,' as my new maid says."

"A penniless 'hearl,'" I laughed.

"You must have plenty of pennies, for you seem to have everything a man can want; but that is different from what a woman can want. I'm sure Helen Blantock and her mother had an understanding. I can hear Lady Blantock saying, 'Nell, dear, you may give Lord Lane encouragement up to a certain point, for it would be nice to be a countess; but don't let him propose yet. Who knows what may happen?' Then what did happen was Sir Horace Jerveyson, who has more pounds than you have pennies. Helen would console herself with the thought that the wife of a knight is as much 'Lady So-and-So' as a countess. I hate that grocerman, and as for Helen, you ought to thank heaven fasting for your escape."

"Perhaps I shall some day, but that day is not yet," I answered. "However, there is still Monte Carlo."

"Shall you drown your sorrows in roulette?" asked Molly, looking horrified.

"Who knows?"

"Don't let her misjudge you," cut in Jack. "Have you forgotten what I told you about the Italian Countess, Molly?"

"Oh, the Countess with whom Lord Lane used to flirt at Davos before he met Miss Blantock? Now I see. You said that you were going to Monte Carlo, on purpose to make Helen Blantock jealous."

"I'm afraid some spiteful idea of the sort was in my mind," I admitted. "But the Countess is fascinating, and if she would be kind, Monte Carlo might effect a cure of the heart, as Davos did of the lungs."

"I believe you're capable of marrying for pique. Oh, if I could prove to you that you aren't, and never have been, in love with Helen!"

"It would be difficult."

"I'll engage to do it, if you'll take my prescription."

"What is that?"

"Cheerful society and amusement. In other words, Jack's and my society, and a tour on our motor car."

"What, make a discord in the music of your duet?"

"Dear old boy, we want you," said Jack.

I was grateful. "I can't tell how much I thank you," I answered. "But I'm in no mood for companionship. The fact is, I'm stunned for the moment, but I fancy that presently I shall find out I'm rather hard hit."

"No, you won't, unless you mope," broke in Molly. "On the contrary, you'll feel it less every day."

"Time will show," said I. "Anyhow, I must dree my own weird—whatever that means. I don't

know, and never heard of anyone who did, but it sounds appropriate. I should like to do a walking tour alone in the desert, if it were not for the annoying necessity to eat and drink. I want to get away from all the people I ever knew or heard of—with the exceptions named."

"One would think you were the only person disappointed in love!" exclaimed Molly. "Why, I have a friend who has really suffered. Dear little Mercédès——"

Mrs. Winston stopped suddenly, drawing in her breath. She looked startled, as if she had been on the point of betraying a state secret; then her eyes brightened; she began abstractedly to trace a leaf on the damask tablecloth. "I have thought of just the thing for you," she said, apparently apropos of nothing. "Why don't you buy or hire a mule to carry your luggage, and walk from Switzerland down into Italy, not over the high roads, but do a pass or two, and for the rest, keep to the footpaths among the mountains, which would suit your mood?"

"The mule isn't a bad scheme," I replied. "A dirty man is an independent animal, but a clean man, or one whose aim is to be clean, is more or less helpless. If he has a weakness for a sponge bag, a clean shirt or two, and evening things to change into after a long tramp, he must go hampered by a caravan of beasts."

"One beast would do," said Molly practically, "unless you count the muleteer, and that depends upon his disposition."

"I suppose muleteers have dispositions," I reflected aloud.

"Mules have. I've met them in America. But

if you think my idea a bright one, reward it by going with Jack and me as far as Lucerne. There you can pick up your mule and your mule-man."

"'A picker-up of unconsidered trifles,'" I quoted dreamily. "Well, if you and Jack are willing to tool me out on your motor car as far as Lucerne, I should be an ungrateful brute to refuse. But the difficulty is, I want to turn a sulky back on my kind at once, while you two——"

"We're starting on the first," said Jack.

"What! No Cowes?"

"We wouldn't give a day on the car for a cycle of Cowes."

And so the plan of my consolation tour was settled, in the supreme court beyond which there is no appeal. But man can do no more than propose; and woman—even American woman—cannot invariably "dispose" to the extent of remaking the whole world of mules and men according to her whim.

CHAPTER II

Mercédès to the Rescue

"What is more intellectually exhilarating to the mind, and even to the senses, than . . . looking down the vista of some great road . . . and to wonder through what strange places, by what towns and castles, by what rivers and streams, by what mountains and valleys it will take him ere he reaches his destination?"—*The Spectator*.

That Locker should have come in at the moment when I was trying on my new automobile get-up was more than a pin-prick to my already ruffled sensibilities—it was a knife-thrust.

"What on earth are you laughing at, man?" I demanded, whipping off the goggles that made me look like a senile owl, and facing him angrily, as he had a sudden need to cover his mouth with a decorous palm.

"I beg pardon, me lord," he said. "It was coming on you sudden in them things. I never thought to see you, me lord, in hotomobeel clothes—you who always was so down on the 'orrid machines."

"Well, help me out of them," I answered, feeling the justice of Locker's implied rebuke. I twisted my wrists free of the elastic wind-cuffs, and shed the unpleasantly heavy coat that Winston had insisted I should buy.

"And you such a friend of the 'orse too, me lord," added Locker, aware that he had me at a disadvantage.

I winced, and felt the need of self-justification. "You're right," I said. "I never thought I should come to it. But all men fall sooner or later, and I have held out longer than most. Don't be afraid, though, that I am going to have a machine of my own: I haven't quite sunk to that; if everybody else I know has. I'm only going across France on Mr. Winston's car. He has a new one—the latest make. He tells me that when he 'lets her out' she does seventy an hour."

"Wot—miles, me lord?" Locker almost dropped the coat of which he had disencumbered me.

"Kilometres. It's the speed of a good quick train."

It was strange; but until the night of that hateful dinner at the Carlton, I had never been in a motor car. Half my friends had them, or meant to have them; but in a kind of lofty obstinacy I had refused to be a "tooled down" to Brighton or elsewhere. Fancying myself considerably as a whip, and being an enthusiastic lover of horses, I had taken up an attitude of hostility to their mechanical rivals, and chuckled with malice whenever I saw in the papers that any acquaintance had been hauled up for going beyond the "legal limit."

But on the night of the Carlton dinner, when Molly Winston whirled me from Pall Mall to Park Lane, that part of me which was not frozen by the grocer (the part the psychologists call the "unconscious secondary self") told me that I was having another startling experience apart from being jilted.

Winston is my oldest friend, and when his letters were mere pæans in praise of automobilism, I looked upon his fad with compassionate indulgence.

Then we met in London after his marriage, and between the confidences which we had exchanged, he managed to sandwich in something about motor cars. But I ruthlessly swept aside the interpolation as unworthy of notice. When he suggested a drive in the new car, I called up all my tact to evade the invitation. If the active part of me had not been stunned on the night when Helen threw me over, I believe I should have kept bright the jewel of consistency. But the kindness of Molly in circumstances the opposite of kind, had undone me. Here I was, pledged to get myself up like a figure of Fun, and sit glued for days to the seat of a noisy, jolting, ill-smelling machine which I hated, feeling (and looking), in my goggles and hairy coat, like a circus monkey or a circus dragon.

Nevertheless, I could confess the motor car to my man with comparative calmness. That I should fall was no doubt a disappointment to him. As a conscientious snob and a cherisher of conservative ideals, he could mention it to other valets without a blush. The mule, however, towards which the motor was to lead, was a different thing; and while poor Locker excavated me from the motor coat, my mind was busily devising means to keep the horrid secret of the mule hidden from him forever.

There was but one way to do this.

"I suppose, me lord, I'm to travel with the 'eavy luggage, and take rooms at the end of the journey," he suggested.

The crucial moment had come. If a man can support existence without the girl he loves, thought I, surely it must be possible for him to live without a valet. "No, Locker," I said firmly. "I am to be Mr. and Mrs. Winston's guest, and we—er—shall

have no fixed destination. I shall be obliged to leave you behind."

"Very good, me lord," returned Locker in a meek voice. "Very good, me lord; *has* you will. I do 'ope you won't suffer from dust, with no one to keep you in proper repair, as you might say. But no doubt it will be only for a short time."

Knowing that days, weeks, and even months might pass while I consorted with motors and mules, far from valets and civilisation, I was nevertheless coward enough to hint that Locker must be prepared for a wire at any time. I had often derived a quaint pleasure from the consciousness that he despised my bookish habits and certain unconventionalities not suited to a 'hearl'; but one must draw the line somewhere, and I drew it at the mule. I would give a good deal rather than Locker should suspect me of the mule.

It was arranged that we should leave from Jack's house in Park Lane, and as we wanted to reach Southampton early, our start was to be at nine o'clock. "In France," Jack had said to me, "we could reel off the distance almost as quickly as the train; but in our blessed land, with its twenty miles an hour speed limit, its narrow winding roads, chiefly used in country places as children's playgrounds, and its police traps, motoring isn't the undiluted joy it ought to be. The thing to prepare for is the unexpected."

At half-past eight at Jack's door, I bade an almost affectionate farewell to the last cabhorse with which for many wild weeks I should have business dealings. The untrammelled life before me seemed to be signalised by the lonely suit case which was the one article of luggage I was allowed to carry on the

motor. A portmanteau was to follow me vaguely about the Continent, and I had visions of a pack to supersede the suit case, when my means of transport should be a mule. Sufficient for the motor was the luggage thereof, however, and when my neat leather case was deposited in Jack's hall, I was rewarded with Molly's approving comment that it would "make a lovely footstool."

We had breakfast together, as though nothing dreadful were about to happen, and I heartened myself up with strong coffee. By the time we had finished, and Molly had changed herself from a radiant girl into a cream-coloured mushroom, with a thick, straight, pale-brown stem, the Thing was at the door—Molly's idol, the new goddess, with its votive priest pouring incense out of a long-nosed oil can and waving a polishing rag for some other mystic rite.

This servant of the car answered to the name of Gotteland, and having learned from Jack that he had started life as a jockey in Hungary, I thought evil of him for abandoning the horse for the machine. He evidently belonged to that mysterious race of beings called suddenly into existence by a vast new industry; mysterious, because how or why a man drifts or jumps into the occupation of chauffeur is never explained to those who see only the finished article. Jack praised him as a model of chauffeury accomplishments, among which were a knowledge of seventeen languages more or less, to say nothing of dialects, and a temper warranted to stand a burst tyre, a disordered silencer, an uncertain ignition, and (incidentally) a broken heart—all occurring at the same time. Despite these alleged perfections, I distrusted the cosmopolitan apostate

on principle, and was about to turn upon his leather-clad form a disapproving gaze, when I dimly realised that it would be a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Instead, I smiled hypocritically as we "took a look" at the car before lending it our lives.

"I hope the brute isn't vicious; doesn't blow up or explode, or shed its safety valve, or anything," I remarked with a facetiousness which in the circumstances did me credit.

Gotteland answered with the pitying air of the professional for the amateur. "The *one* thing an automobile can't do, sir, is to blow up."

I was glad to hear this, in spite of the strong coffee lately swallowed, but on the other hand there were doubtless a great many other equally disagreeable things which it could do. Of course, if it were satisfied with merely killing me, neatly and thoroughly, I still felt that I should not mind; indeed, would be rather grateful than otherwise. But there were objections, even for a jilted lover, to being smeared along the ground, and picked up, perhaps, without a nose, or the proper complement of legs, or vertebræ.

"Anyhow, the beast has a certain meretricious beauty," I admitted. "Those red cushions and all that bright metal work give an effect of luxury."

Gotteland revenged his idol with another smile. "Amateurs *do* notice such things, sir," said he. "Professionals don't care much about the body; it's the motor that interests them." He lifted a sort of lattice which muzzled the dragon's mouth, disclosing some bulbous cylinders and a tangle of pipes and wires. "It's the *dernier cri*. That engine will work as long as there's a drop of essence in the carburet-

ter, and will carry you at forty miles an hour, without feeling a hill which would set many cars groaning and puffing. It will do the work of twenty horses, and more——"

"Yet I shouldn't be *really* surprised if one horse had to tow it some day," I murmured more to myself than to him, but Molly heard me, through her mushroom.

"You'll soon apologise to Mercédès for your doubts of her, for motors are their own missionaries," she said, her eyes laughing through a triangular talc window. "You will have learned to love her before you know what has happened, just as you would the real Mercédès, if you could see her."

Curious, I thought, that Molly, knowing my state of mind, should be constantly weaving into our conversation some allusion to the namesake and giver of her car. I had never in my life been less interested in the subject of extraneous girls, and with all Molly's tact, it seemed strange that she should not recognise this. However, she did not appear to expect an answer, and we were soon settled in the car, Molly, as I have said, looking like a graceful fungus growth, Jack and I like haggard goblins.

Molly was to drive, and Jack insisted that I should sit in one of the two absurdly comfortable armchair arrangements in front. The chauffeur was presently to curl like a tendril round a little crimson toadstool at our feet, and Jack took the tonneau in lonely state. This was, no doubt, an act of fine self-abnegation on his part, nevertheless I could have envied him his safe retirement, from my place of honour, with no noble horses in front to save Molly and me from swift destruction.

Physically, we were very snug, however. The

luggage was fitted into spaces especially made for it; long baskets on the mudguards at the side were stowed with maps and guide-books for the tour, and (as Molly remarked in the language of her childhood) a "few nice little 'eaties' to make us independent on the way."

There was also a sort of glorified tea basket, containing, Molly said, a chafing-dish, without which no self-respecting American woman ever travelled, and by whose aid wonderful dishes could be turned out at five minutes' notice in a shipwreck, on a desert island, or while a tyre was being mended.

As I mentally finished my last will and testament, Gotteland gave a short twist to the dragon's tail, which happened to be in front. Instantly a heart began to throb, throb. The chauffeur sprang to his toadstool. Molly moved a lever which said "R-r-r-tch," pressed one of her small but determined American feet on something, and the car gave a kind of a smooth, gliding leap forward, as if sent spinning from an unseen giant's hand.

Though it was but just after nine, the early omnibus had gathered its tribute of toiling or shopping worms, and was too prevalent in Park Lane for my peace of mind. There were also enormous drays, which looked, as our frail bark passed under their bows, like huge Atlantic liners. The hansoms were fierce black sharks skimming viciously round us, and there were other monsters whose forms I had no time to analyse; but into the midst of this seething ocean Molly pitilessly hurled us. How we slipped into spaces half our own width and came out scatheless, Providence alone knew, but it seemed that kindly Fate must soon tire of sparing us, we tempted it so often.

"Here's a smash!" I said to myself grimly, at the corner of Hamilton Place, and it flashed through my brain, with a mixture of self-contempt and pity, that my last thought before the end would be one of sordid satisfaction because a fortnight ago I had reluctantly paid an accident assurance premium.

My fingers yearned with magnetic attraction toward the arms of the seat, but with all that was manly in me I resisted. I wreathed my face with a smile which, though stiff as a plaster mask, was a useful screen; and as South African tan is warranted not to wear off during a lifetime, I could feel as pale as I pleased without visible disgrace.

"How do you like it?" asked Molly.

"Glorious," I breezily returned.

"Ah, I *thought* you would enjoy it, when—as they say of babies—you 'began to take notice.' The other night, of course, you were a little absent-minded. Besides, it was dark, and the streets were dull and empty. A motor *is* just as nice as a horse, isn't it? Do say so, if only to please me."

Now I knew why the victims of the Inquisition told any lie which happened to come handy. I said that it was marvellous how soon the thing got hold of one; and Molly's mushroom reared itself proudly. "That is because you are so brave," said the poor, deceived girl. "Of course it's having been a soldier, and all that. People who've been in battle wouldn't think anything of a first motor experience ("Oh, wouldn't they?" I inwardly chortled). But, do you know, Lord Lane, I've actually seen men who were quite brave in other ways, feel a little *queer* the first time they drove in an automobile through traffic, or even in quiet country roads? I don't suppose you can understand it."

"I couldn't," I replied valiantly, "were not imagination the first ingredient of sympathy. But—er—don't you think that omnibus in front is rather large—near, I mean? You mustn't exert yourself to talk, you know, for my sake, if you need to give your whole attention to driving."

"I like to talk. It's no exertion at all," said Molly, and I fancy I responded with some base flattery, though by this time that smile of mine was so hard you could have knocked it off with a hammer.

"The first day I went through traffic," she continued, "my toes had the funniest sensation, as if they were turning up in my shoes. One seemed to come so awfully *near* everything, without any horses in front."

At this very moment my own toes happened to feel as if they were pasted back on my insteps; yet I laughed heartily at the suggestion, and to my critical ear there was only a slight hollowness in the ring, although before us now loomed a huge railway van. It was loaded with iron bars, their rusty ends hanging far out and sagging towards the roadway, enough to frighten the gentlest automobile. Ours seemed far from gentle, and besides, we could not possibly stop in time to avoid impalement on the iron spikes. Molly and I, if not Jack and the chauffeur, must surely die a peculiarly unpleasant and unnecessary death, in the morning of our lives, just as other more fortunate people were starting out, safe and happy in exquisitely beautiful omnibuses, to begin their day's pleasure. And Molly believed, because I had been in a few battles, with nothing worse than a bee-like buzzing of some innocent bullets in my ears, that I should be callous in a motor car.

However, the bravest soldiers are those who feel fear, and fight despite it. I maintain that I deserved a Victoria Cross for the grim smile which did not leave my lips as I braced myself for the death-dealing blow. But, as in a dream one finds without surprise that the precipice, over which one is hanging by an eyebrow, obligingly transforms itself into a bank of violets, so did the dragon which had been whirling us to destruction magically change into a swan-like creature skimming just out of harm's way.

I now reflected, with a vague sense of self-disgust, that, instead of being glad to leave the world which had denied me Helen, I had felt distinctly annoyed at the necessity, had not given a thought to my lost love, and had been thankful for the mere gift of life without her.

"I'm so glad you don't think I'm reckless," said Molly, as quietly as though we had not passed through a crisis; and indeed to this day I do not believe she would admit that we had.

"I'm really very careful; Jack says I am. He takes tremendous risks sometimes, or at least it seems so when you're not driving. You'll see the difference when *he's* in front."

I refrained from comment, but I had never valued Jack's friendship less, and I was in the act of concocting a telegram from Locker which might recall me to London, when from the speed of the Scotch express we slowed down to a pace which would have been mean even for a donkey. We continued this rate of progression for a peaceful but all too brief interval; then in the line of traffic opened a narrow canal which I hoped might escape Molly's eye. But there was no such luck. She saw; we

leaped into it, raced down it, and before I could have said "knife," or any other equally irrelevant word of one syllable, we had left everything else behind.

I expected to be (to put it mildly) as uncomfortable as I had been before my short respite, yet strange to say, this was not the case. I did not know what was the matter with me, but suddenly I seemed to be enjoying myself. The tension of muscles relaxed, as if a string which had held them tight—like the limbs of a Jumping Jack—had been let go. I leaned back against the crimson cushions of my seat with a new and singular sense of well-being. Once, as a volunteer in South Africa, I had felt the same when, after having a splinter of bone taken out, under chloroform, I had waked up to be told it was all over. This wasn't over, but somehow, I didn't want it to be.

We took Putney Bridge at a gulp, and swallowed the long hill to Wimbledon Common in the fashion of a hungry anaconda; but before we arrived at this stage a thing happened which unexpectedly raised my opinion of motor cars. It was in the Fulham Road that we glided close behind a hansom bowling along at a rattling pace. Traffic on our right prevented us from passing, and Molly had just remarked how vexing it was to be kept back by a mere hansom, when plunk! down went the little nag on his nose. It was one of those tumbles in which the horse collapses in a limp heap without any sliding, though he had been going fast downhill, and of course the hansom stopped dead. The whole scene was as quick as the flashing of a biograph. The driver struggled to keep his seat, clawing at the shiny roof of the cab; his fare, in a silk hat and pa-

thetic frock coat, shot from the vehicle like a flying Mercury, and this time it seemed that nothing could keep us from telescoping the vehicle thus suddenly arrested a few feet ahead.

But I reckoned without Molly. Her little gloved hand, and the high-heeled American toys she had for feet, moved like lightning. Without any violent wrench, the car stopped apparently in less than its own length, and as, even thus, we were too close upon the cab, Molly threw a quick glance behind, then bade Mercédès glide gently backward.

With the fall of the horse, Jack rose in the tonneau, with the instinct of protection over Molly. But he said not a word till she had guided the car to safety, when he gave her a little congratulatory pat on the shoulder. "Good girl; that was perfect. Couldn't have been better," he murmured. We waited until we had seen that neither man nor horse was badly hurt, and then sped on again, with a certain respect for the motor rankling in my reluctant heart. Comparing its behaviour with that of an automobile, Hansom's ironically named "Patent Safety" had not a wheel to stand upon.

When we were clear of Kingston, and winging lightly along the familiar Portsmouth Road, with its dark pines and purple gleams of heather, I began to feel an exhilaration scarcely short of treacherous to my principles. We were now putting on speed, and running as fast as most trains on the South-Western, yet the sensation was far removed from any I had experienced in travelling by rail, even on famous lines, which give glorious views if one does not mind cinders in the eye or the chance of having one's head knocked off like a ripe apple. I seemed to be floating in a great opaline sea of pure,

fresh air; for such dust as we raised was beaten down from the tonneau by the screen, and it did not trouble us. Our speed appeared to turn the country into a panorama flying by for our amusement; and yet, fast as we went, to my surprise I was able to appreciate every feature, every incident of the road. Each separate beauty of the way was threaded like a bead on a rosary.

Here was Sandown Park, which I had regarded as the goal of a respectable drive from town, with horses; but we were taking it, so to speak, in our first stride. Esher was no sooner left behind than quaint old sleepy Cobham came to view; between there and Ripley was but a gliding step over a road which slipped like velvet under our wheels. Then a fringe of trees netted across a blue, distant sea of billowing hills, and a few minutes later we were sailing under Guildford's suspended clock.

It was somewhere near the hour of one when Molly brought the car gently to a standstill by the roadside, and announced that she would not go a yard further without lunch. The chauffeur successfully took up the part of butler at a moment's notice, busying himself with the baskets, spreading a picnic cloth under a shady tree, and putting a bottle of Graves to cool in a neighbouring brook. Meanwhile Molly was doing mysterious things with her chafing-dish and several little china jars. By the time Jack and I had with awkward alacrity bestowed plates, glasses, knives, and forks on the most hummocky portions of the cloth, white and rosy flakes of lobster *à la* Newburg were simmering appetisingly in a creamy froth.

I was deeply interested in this cult of the chafing-dish, which could, in an incredibly short time, serve

up by the wayside a little feast fit for a king—who had not got dyspepsia.

"Can't you imagine the programme if we had gone to an inn?" asked Jack, proud of his bride's handiwork. "We should have walked into a dingy dining-room, with brown wallpaper and four steel engravings of bloodthirsty scenes from the Old Testament. A sleepy head waiter would have looked at me with a polite but puzzled expression, as if at a loss to know why on earth we had come. I should have enquired deprecatingly: 'What can you give us for lunch?' What would he have replied?"

"There's only one possible answer to that conundrum, and it doesn't take any guessing," said I. "The reply would have been: 'Cold 'am or beef, sir; chops, if you choose to wait.' Those words are probably now being spoken to some hundreds of sad travellers less fortunate than our favoured and sylvan selves."

"If you would like to have a chafing-dish in your family," remarked Jack, "you'll have to marry an American girl."

"I'm no Duke," said I.

"Earls aren't to be despised, if there are no Dukes handy," said Molly. "Besides, it's getting a little obvious to marry a Duke."

"Which is the reason you took up with a chauffeur," retorted Jack.

"You call yourself a 'penniless hearl,'" went on Molly, "and I suppose, of course, you are 'belted.' All earls are, in poetry and serials, which must be convenient when you're *really* very poor, because if you're hungry, you can always take a reef in your belt, while mere plain men have no such resource. Have you got yours on now?"

"It's in pawn," said I. "It's no joke about being penniless. Jack will tell you I'm obliged to let my dear old house in Oxfordshire, and the only luxuries I can afford are a few horses and a few books. I prefer them to necessities—since I can't have both."

I thought that Molly might laugh, but instead she looked abnormally grave. "Jack told me," she said, "how, when you and he came over to America, six or seven years ago, to shoot big game, you avoided girls, for fear people might suppose your alleged bear hunt was really an heiress hunt. I forgive Jack, because that was in the dark ages, before he knew there was a Me. But why should a girl be shunned by nice men solely because she's an heiress? Can't she be as pretty and lovable in herself as a poor girl?"

"She can," I replied, emphasising my words with a look in Molly's face. "No doubt she often is. But I do wish some American girls who marry men from our side of the water wouldn't let the papers advertise their weddings as 'functions' (sounds like obscure workings of physical organs), attended by the families of their exclusive acquaintance, worth, when lumped together, a billion of dollars or so."

"I know. It's as if they were prize pigs at a fair, and were of no importance except for their dollars," sighed Molly. "And then, the detectives to watch the presents! It's disgusting. But some of our newspapers are like Mr. Hyde. Poor Dr. Jekyll can't do anything with him; and anyhow, you needn't think we're all like that. I have a friend who is one of the greatest heiresses in America, but she hates her money. It has made her very un-

happy, though she's only twenty-one years old. If you could see Mercédès, with her lovely, strange sad face, and big, wistful eyes——"

"I can think of Mercédès only with a shiny grey body, upholstered crimson; and for eyes, huge acetylene lamps," I was rude enough to break in; for I fancied that I saw what Mistress Molly would fain be up to, and my heart was not of the rubber-ball description, to be caught in the rebound. If Molly cherished a secret intention of springing her peerless friend Mercédès upon me, during this tour which she had organised, it seemed better for everyone concerned that the hope should be nipped in the bud. It was with unwonted meekness that she yielded to being suppressed, and I suffered immediate pangs of remorse. To atone, I did my best to be agreeable. All the way to Southampton I praised automobiles in general and hers in particular; admitted that in half a day I had become half a convert; and soon I had the pleasure of believing that the divine Molly had forgotten my sin.

CHAPTER III

My Lesson

"The broad road that stretches."
—R. L. Stevenson.

Forty-eight hours later we drove out of Havre, bound for Paris and Lucerne, where I was to "pick up" that mule, and become a lone wanderer on the face of the earth. Gotteland had seen to the shipping of the car from Southampton, while we spent a day on the crowded sands of Trouville, where I was so lucky as to meet no one I knew.

It was only now, Winston said, that I should realise to the full the joys of motoring, impossible to taste under present conditions in England. Our way was to lie along the Seine to Paris, and Jack recalled to us Napoleon's saying that "Paris, Rouen, and Havre form only one city, of which the Seine is the highway."

Last year, these two had seen the country of the Loire together, under curious and romantic conditions, and now Molly was to be shown another great river in France. We changed places in the car, like players in the old game of "stage coach." Sometimes Molly had the reins, and I the seat of honour by her side. Sometimes Jack drove, with Molly beside him, I in the tonneau; then I knew that they were perfectly happy, though Gotteland and I could hear every word they said, and their

talk was generally of what we passed by the way, occasionally interspersed by a "Do you remember?"

Now, if there is an insufferable companion under the sun, it is the average "well-informed person" who continually dins into your ears things you were born knowing. This I resent, for I flatter myself that I was born knowing a good many exceptionally interesting and exciting things which can't be learned by studying history, geography, or even *Tit-Bits*. Jack Winston, however, though he has actually taken the trouble to house in his memory an enormous number of facts,—"those brute beasts of the language,"—has so tamed and idealised the creatures as to make them not only tolerable but attractive. I can even hear him tell things which I myself don't know or have forgotten, without instantly wishing to throw a jug of water at his good-looking head; indeed, I egg him on and have been tempted to jot down an item of information on my shirt cuff, with a view of fixing it in my mind, and eventually getting it off as my own.

Whenever Molly or I admired any object, natural or artificial, it seemed that Jack knew all about it. She showed a flattering interest in everything he said, and, fired by her compliments, he suddenly exclaimed: "Look here, Molly, suppose we don't hurry on, the way we've been planning to do? Last year we had that wonderful chain of feudal châteaux in Touraine, to show us what kingly and noble life was in dim old days. Now, all along the Seine and near it, we shall have some splendid churches instead of castles. We can hold a revel, almost an orgie, of magnificent ecclesiastical architecture if we like to spend the time. I've got Ferguson's book

and Parker's, anyhow, and why shouldn't we run off the beaten track——"

"No, dearest," said his wife gently, but firmly, and I could have hugged her. My bump of reverence for the Gothic in all its developments is creditably large, but in my present "lowness of mind," as Molly would say, a long procession of cold, majestic cathedrals would have reduced me to a limp pulp. "No," Molly went on, "I can't help thinking that the churches would be a sort of anticlimax after our beloved, warm-blooded châteaux. It would be like being taken to see your great-grandmother's grave when you'd been promised a matinée. You know we engaged to get Lord Lane into his lonely fastnesses as soon as possible——"

"I don't believe Monty's in any hurry for them," said Jack, crestfallen. "You ask him if——"

"He'd be too polite to be truthful. No, I'm sure that edelweiss will do him more good than rose windows, and mountain air than incense."

As she thus prescribed for my symptoms, she gazed through her talc window with marked particularity into her "Lightning Conductor's" ungoggled face. It wore a puzzled expression at first, which suddenly brightened into comprehension. "Do they repent having brought me along, and want to get rid of me?" I asked myself. I could scarcely believe this. They were too kind and cordial; still, something in that look exchanged between them hinted at a secret which concerned me, and my curiosity was pricked. Nevertheless, I was grateful to Molly, whatever her motive might be for hurrying on to Paris. Fond as I was of the two, their happy love, constantly though inadvertently displayed before my eyes, was not a panacea for the

wound which they were trying to cure, and I still longed for high Alpine solitudes.

I had let myself drift into a gloomy thought-land, when it occurred to Jack that I had better learn to drive. No doubt the dear fellow fancied that I "wanted rousing," and certainly I got it. Luckily, as a small boy, I had taken an interest in mechanics, to the extent of various experiments actively disapproved of by my family, and the old fire was easily relit. I listened to his harangue in mere civility at first, then with a certain eagerness. Molly sat in the tonneau, Jack driving, full-petrol ahead, and I beside him. We talked motor talk, and he forgot the churches, except when they seemed actually to come out of their way to get in ours. I listened, and at the same time gathered impressions of roads—long, strange, curiously individual roads.

Someone has written of the "long, long Indian day." I should like to write of the long, long roads of France. They had never before had any place in my thoughts. Paris and the Riviera had been France for me till now. I had never been intimate, never even got on terms of real friendship with any country save my own; and I had sometimes been narrow enough to take a kind of pride in this. The sweet English country had yielded up her secrets to me; I knew her spring whimsies, her soft summer moods, her autumn dreams, her wintry tempers, and I had vaunted my faithfulness and love. But here was France in prime of summer, giving me of her best. My heart warmed to her loveliness, and I sniffed the perfume of her breath, mysteriously characteristic as the chosen perfume of some loved woman's laces. It was glorious to spin on, on, between the rows of sentinel poplars, bound for the

horizon, yet never reaching it, and regarding crowded haunts of men more as interruptions than as halting places.

Harfleur was a mere mirage to me, a vision of a gently decaying town left stranded by the stream of civilisation, flowing past to busy Havre. Some lines from "Henry the Fifth" made elusive music in my brain, mixed with a discussion of carburetters, explosion chambers, and sparking-plugs. At Lillebonne, Winston deigned to break short his string of motor technicalities and point out the position of the Roman theatre, almost the sole treasure of the sort possessed by Northern Europe. I stared through my goggles at the castle where the Conqueror unfolded to the assembled barons his scheme for invading England; and I begged for a slackening of speed at ancient Caudebec, which, with its quay and terrace overhanging the Seine, and its primly pruned elms, had such an air of happy peace that I wished to stamp it firmly in my memory. Such mental photographs are convenient when one courts sleep at night, and has grown weary of counting uncountable sheep jumping over a stile.

Beyond Caudebec we sailed along a road running high on the shoulder of the hill, with wide views over the serpentine writhings of the Seine. Here, Jack urged a turning aside for St. Wandeville or, at least, for the abbey of Jumièges, poetic with memories of Agnes Sorel, whose heart lies in the keeping of the monks, though her body sleeps at Loches. But Molly would countenance no loitering. *Her* body, she said, should sleep at Paris that night.

We held straight on, therefore, keeping to a road at the foot of white cliffs, sometimes near the river, sometimes leaving it. Quickly enough to please even

this unaccountably impatient Molly, we had measured off the fifty miles separating Havre from Rouen, and slowed down for the venerable streets of the Norman capital.

"I suppose even you will want to give half an hour to the cathedral which I love best in France?" Jack inquired, looking back at Molly as he turned from the quay up the Rue Grand Port, and stopped in the mellow shade of an incomparable pile which towered above us.

Molly's mushroom, however, was agitated in dissent. She has an American chin, and an American chin spells determination. We could not see it, but we knew that it meant business. "You and I will spend hours in the cathedral another time," she said. "But now——" She did not finish her sentence, nevertheless a look of comprehension again lighted up Jack's face, which for the moment was innocent of goggles.

"Molly's so keen on the Maid," said he, "that she can't forgive Rouen for not really being the scene of the trial and burning. But never mind, since she wills it, we'll shake the dust off our Michelins, and when we're outside, you will have got far enough in your motoring lesson, I think, to try driving."

What the last hour had not taught me (thanks to him) in theory of coils and accumulators, electromagnets and other things, was scarcely worth learning. I seemed to have looked through glass walls into the cylinders, at the fussy little pistons working under control of the "governor,"—a tyrant, I felt sure. I had already formed a mature opinion on the question of mechanically operated inlet valves (which sounded disagreeably surgical), and was

able to judge what their advantage ought to be over those of the old type worked by the suction of the piston. I could imagine that more than half the fun of owning a motor car would lie in understanding the thing inside and out; and I said so.

"It's a little like controlling the elements," Jack answered. "Think of the difference in this machine, when it's asleep—cold and quiet, an engine mounted on a frame, a tank of water, a reservoir of cheap spirit, a pump, a radiator, a magnet, some geared wheels fitting together, a lever or two. My man twists a handle. On the instant the machine leaps into frenzied life. The carburetter sprays its vapour into the explosion chamber, the magnet flashes its sparks to ignite it, the cooling water bathes the hot walls of the cylinders—a thing of nerves, and ganglions, and tireless muscles is panting eagerly at your service. You move this lever, you press your foot lightly on this pedal; the engine transfers its power to the wheels; you move. The carriage with you and your friends is borne at railway speed across continents. You can hurl yourself at sixty miles an hour along the great highroads, you can crawl like a worm through the traffic of cities."

By the time Jack had finished this harangue we had climbed the hill out of Rouen and were on the fine but *accidenté* highroad that leads past Boos and Pont St. Pierre. Soon we would reach Les Andelys and Château Gaillard. Still Jack was not quite ready to let me put my newly acquired knowledge into practice. There was a hill of some consequence before Mantes, which we had to reach by way of La Roche Guyon and Limay. After that there would be only what the route book calls "*fortes ondulations*"; and under the stronghold of

Lion Heart himself (an appropriate spot, forsooth!) I was to try my hand at dragon-driving.

Winston brought the car to a standstill at the foot of the mouldering ruins of Richard's "Saucy Castle," and as we looked up at the towering battlements, the huge flanking towers, and the ponderous citadel, the dark mass on its lofty rock set in the sunny landscape like a bloodstone in a gold ring, seemed to be an epitome in stone of life in the Middle Ages.

I uttered every idea that came into my mind concerning the ruin, and squeezed my brain for more, till my head felt like a drained orange; not that I enjoyed hearing myself talk, or thought that Jack and Molly would do so, but because they could not well interrupt the flow of my eloquence to remind me of the reason for our stop.

At last, however, silence fell upon us. It was a shock to me when Molly broke it. "Oh, Lord Lane, have you forgotten that this is where you're to begin driving? The road is nice and broad here."

I put on a brave air, as does one at the dentist's. "I hope that you're not afraid I shall run you into a ditch?" I asked, laughing. "I don't believe, after all, it can be any worse than steering a toboggan down a good run, or driving a four-in-hand with one's eyes shut, as I did once for a wager on a road I knew as I knew my own hat."

"Perhaps it isn't exactly *worse*," said Molly, "still—I think you'll find it *different*."

I did.

Meanwhile, however, Winston was cheering me on. "You'll find steering the simplest thing in the world, really," he assured me. "There's no car so

sensitive as this. The faster you go, the easier it is——"

"But, perhaps he'd better not try to prove *that*, just at first!" cried Molly, with an affected little gasp.

"No, no; certainly he won't, my child. He won't go beyond a walk until he's sure of himself and the car. You needn't be frightened. I know my man, or I shouldn't trust him with you and your Mercédès. Now, then, Monty, are you ready?"

I had never before sufficiently realised the solemnity of that word "now." It sounded in my ears like a knell, but I swallowed hard, and echoed it. To do myself justice, though, I don't think I was afraid. I was only in a funk that I should do something stupid, and be disgraced forever in the eyes of Molly Winston. However, I reflected, it couldn't be so very bad. Molly herself, and even Jack, had to learn. Winston had explained to me several times the purpose of all the different levers, and, at least, I shouldn't touch the brake handle when I wanted to change the speed.

"No need to grip the wheel so tightly," said Jack, and I became aware that I had been clinging to it as if it were a forlorn hope. "A light touch is best, you know; it's rather like steering a boat. A very slight movement does it, and in half an hour it has got to be automatic. Of course, always start on the lowest, that is, the first speed, and with the throttle nearly shut."

Mine was in much the same condition, but I managed to mutter something as I moved the lever, and touched the clutch-pedal with a caress timid as a falling snowflake. Almost apologetically, I slid the lever into position, and let in the clutch. Somehow,

I had not expected it to answer so soon; but, as if it disliked being patted by a stranger, the dragon took the bit between its teeth and bolted. I hung on and did things more by instinct than by skill, for the beast was hideously lithe and strong, a thousand times stronger and wilder than I had dreamed.

Every faculty of body and brain was concentrated on first keeping the monster out of the ditch on the off side, then the ditch on the near. My eyes expanded until they must have filled my goggles. We waltzed, we wavered, we shied, until we outdid the Seine in the windings of its channel.

I fully expected that Winston would pluck me like a noxious weed from the driver's seat where I had taken root, and snatch the helm himself; but strange to relate, I remained unmolested. Jack confined his interference to an occasional "Whoa," or "Steady, old boy"; while in the tonneau so profound a silence reigned that, if I had had time to think of anything, I should have supposed Molly to be swooning.

"Why don't you curse me, and put me out of my misery?" I gasped, when I had by a miracle avoided a tree as large as a house, which I had seen deliberately step out of its proper place to get in my way.

"'Curse you,' my dear fellow? You're doing splendidly," said Jack. "You deserve praise, not blows. I did a lot worse when I began."

Thus encouraged, I gained confidence in myself and the machine. Almost at once, I was conscious of improvement in mastering the touch of the wheel. Soon, I was imitating a straight line with fair success, subject to a few graceful deviations. I realised that, after all, we were not going very fast,

though my sensation at starting had been that of hanging on to a streak of greased lightning.

I began to sigh for more worlds to conquer, and when Jack reminded me that we were on the first speed, I pronounced myself equal to an experiment with the second. He made me practice taking one hand from the wheel, looking about me a little, and trying to keep the car straight by feeling rather than sight. When I had accomplished these feats, and had not brought the car to grief (even though we passed several vehicles, and I was drawn by a demoniac influence to swerve towards each one as if it had been the loadstone to my magnet, or the candle to my moth), Jack finally consented to grant my request. He told me clearly what to do, and I did it, or some inward servant of myself did, whenever the master was within an ace of losing his head. I pressed down the clutch-pedal, pulled the lever affectionately towards me, and very gradually opened the throttle, so as not to startle it. In spite of my caution, however, I thought for an instant we were really going to get on the other side of the horizon, which had been avoiding us for so long. We shot ahead alarmingly, but to my intense relief, as well as surprise, I found that Jack had not exaggerated. It was easier to steer on the second speed than on the first. I had merely to tickle the wheel with my finger, to send us gliding, swanlike, this way or that. To be sure, I did well-nigh run over a chicken, but I would be prepared to argue with it till it was black in the face (or resort to litigation, if necessary) that the proper place for its blood would be on its own silly head, not mine.

Elated by my triumphs, I scarcely listened further to Jack's directions; how, if I thought there was

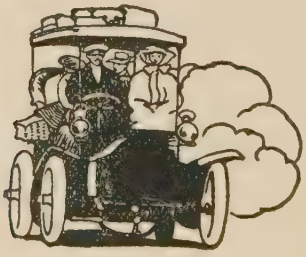
danger, all I had to do was to unclutch, and put on the brake, whereupon the car would stop as if by magic, as it had for Molly in the Fulham Road; how I must not forget that the foot brakes had a way of obeying fiercely, and must not be applied with violence; how I must remember to pull the brake lever by my hand, towards me if I wanted to stop; how it acted on expanding rings on the inside faces of drums, which were on the back wheels (I pitied those poor, concealed faces, for the description was neuralgic, somehow), and I could lock them at almost any speed.

"I want to get on the third, and then I'll try the fourth, thank you," I interpolated impatiently. "More—more! Faster, faster! Whew, this knocks spots out of the Ice Run!"

"Let him have his way, Jack," cried Molly, speaking for the first time. "Hurrah, the motor microbe is in his blood, and never, never will he get it out again."

"Full speed ahead, then!" said Jack.

I took him at his word. I could have shouted for joy. Mercédès was mine, and I was Mercédès'.



CHAPTER IV

Pots, Kettles, and Other Things

"Seared is, of course, my heart—but unsubdued
Is, and shall be, my appetite for food."
—C. S. Calverley.

"A little buttery, and therein
A little bin,
Which keeps my little loaf of bread
Unchipt, unflead;
Some little sticks of thorn or brier
Make me a fire."
—Robert Herrick.

If any man had told me before I started, that in two days I should find it a genuine sacrifice to stop driving a motor car, I should have looked upon him as a polite lunatic. It was only because Jack could drive faster than he dared to let me, and because I was ashamed to tell Molly that after all I was not in a desperate hurry to reach Paris or anywhere else, that I finally tore myself from the driver's seat of the Mercédès. Afterwards, though I had not reached the stage when confession is good for the soul, I sat wondering what there was expensive and at the same time disagreeable which I could give up for the sake of possessing a motor of my own. In various phases of my mental and spiritual development, I had framed different conceptions of a future state beyond this life. Never, even in my earliest years, had I sincerely wished to be an angel with an undeserved crown weighing down my forehead, and a

harp, which I should be totally incompetent to play, within my hand; but now it struck me that there might be a worse sort of Nirvana than driving a 10,000 horsepower car along a broad, straight road free from dogs, chickens, or any other animals (except, perhaps, rich, knighted grocers), and reaching all round Saturn's ring.

Dogs had been the one "little speck in garnered fruit" for me when driving, for I love dogs and would not willingly injure so much as the end hair of the most moth-eaten mongrel's tail; therefore my brain searched a remedy against their onslaught, as I sat mute, inglorious, in the tonneau, after my late triumphs.

We flashed on, passing the kilometre stones in quick succession. At pretty little Mantes we crossed the Seine, and presently came into the France I knew in my old, conventional way; for we passed St. Germain, and so on to Paris by Le Pecq, Reuil, the long descent to the Pont de Suresnes (which seemed to hold laughable memories for Jack and Molly), through the Bois down the Champs Elysées, and to our hotel in the Place Vendôme, where Jack announced that we had had a run of 130 miles. Winston and I flattered ourselves that Paris had few secrets from us (though I don't doubt that five minutes' wrestling with Baedeker might have made us feel small), and we had no wish to linger at this season. But, if we were deaf to the sirens who sing in the Rue de la Paix, Molly was not. She had discovered that there were some "little things she wanted, which she really thought she had better buy." I fancy that the little things were shoes; anyhow, it was to be Jack's blissful privilege to help her choose them, and he was of opinion (probably

founded on experience) that it would take nearly all day. I decided to call on a man at the Embassy, ask him out to lunch, and do him very well. I had not seen him for years, and he had bored me to extinction the last time we met; but it had come to my ears that he had been in love with Helen Blantock, and proposed to her, so I felt that there would be a certain charm in his society. Later, there was a "little thing" which I, too, wished to buy (though I did not intend to seek it in the Rue de la Paix), and then I was to meet Molly and Jack about tea time at our hotel, in time to arrange for dining out somewhere.

After all, the man was more boring than ever, as he had got himself engaged to another girl, and insisted upon talking of her, instead of Helen. My one pleasure in the day, therefore, lay in purchasing the article on which I had fixed my mind after driving yesterday. This was a water pistol, warranted to keep dogs at bay, in motoring. I had some difficulty in obtaining it, and when I did, it was expensive, but I was rewarded by the thought of the pleasure my acquisition would afford my friends. The wild dashes of dogs in front of the wheels gave Molly such frequent starts of anguish, that I wondered Jack had not thought of this simple preventive, and I congratulated myself on having remembered an advertisement of the weapon which I had seen in some magazine. It was, I thought, rather clever of me to remember, since in those days motors had been no affair of mine; but then, the illustration had been striking, in every sense of the word. It had represented a lovely girl, with hair unbound, saving from destruction the automobile in which she sat with several companions, by shooting a fierce blast of water into the face of a huge beast

well-nigh as terrible as Cerberus. I determined to surprise Jack and Molly, when the right time should come; accordingly, the moment I reached our hotel, I filled the pistol with water, and placed it, thus loaded, in the pocket of my motoring coat ready for emergencies. Hardly had I made this preparation for the future when I discovered on the table a note addressed to me in Winston's handwriting.

"Dear Monty," I read, "Molly and I have a bet on. She has bet me a dinner that you will drive her car out to Madrid, and meet us at half-past seven, so that we can have the dinner by daylight. I have bet her the same dinner that you won't. Which of us must pay?—Yours, Jack."

I whistled. What, drive the car through the traffic of Paris? It must be a joke. Of course it was a joke, but——

When I had dressed for dinner, I strolled over to the garage not far away where the creature lurked. Anyhow, I would have a look at her, and see what orders Gotteland had received. Yes, of course it was a joke. Or else my poor friends had gone mad. Still, there was a kind of madness with method in it. Diabolical wretches, with their bets, and their dinners! Did they dream I would try to do it, and smash the car? "Nothing like driving a motor through traffic, to give one self-confidence afterwards," Jack had said yesterday, after praising me for refraining from killing a small boy in a village street. "Once a man has been thrown on his own resources, and has got through the ordeal all right, it is as good as a certificate," he had added.

Gotteland was in the shrine of his goddess, talking

to other cosmopolitan-looking persons in leather. There was a nice smell of petrol in the place. I snuffed at it as a war-horse scents the battle, and promptly decided that the joke should become deadly earnest, no matter what the consequence to the car, the chauffeur, or myself.

"Everything is ready, my lord," said one of the sacrifices about to be offered up. He had now discovered that there was a sort of starting-handle to my name, and seemed as fond of using it as he was of the equivalent on his beloved motor.

"Did Mr. Winston—er—say anything about my driving?" I humbly inquired.

"Well, my lord, his orders were that it should be as you pleased. But perhaps I had better mention that driving is careless in Paris, with cabs and automobiles all over the road, to say nothing of the trams; and then there's the keeping to the right instead of the left. If you should happen to get a little confused, my lord, not being accustomed to drive in France——"

"I wish I had a *mille* note for every time I've driven a four-in-hand through this blessed town," said I. "I'm not afraid if you're not."

"Oh, my lord, I've been in so many accidents, one or two more can't matter," he replied, as Hercules might have replied if asked whether he were equal to a Thirteenth Labour in odd moments. "When I was jockey in Count Tokai's racing stables, a horse went mad and kicked me nearly to death. Then I was a racer in old bicycling days, and had several bad spills. This scar on my face I got in a smash with one of the first Benz cars made. My master thought it a fine thing at that time to go ten miles an hour, and before he'd driven much, my

lord, he was determined to take the car through the streets of Düsseldorf himself. There was a wagon coming one way——"

"Thank you," I cut in, "I'll hear the rest of that story another time. I'm not sure it would exhilarate me much at the moment. We'll be off now, and I'll do my best not to adorn you with a second scar."

Without another word, Gotteland started the motor. The critical eyes of the assembled chauffeurs pierced to my marrow, but I squared my shoulders, prayed my presence of mind to behave itself and not get stage fright; then—*noblesse oblige!*—we swept in a creditable curve to the door of the garage, and out in fine style. Gotteland also tried to look unconcerned. I think I must have seen this with my ears, as both eyes were fully occupied in searching a way through the surging current of street traffic, but I did see it. I was pleased to find that I was the better actor of the two, for Gotteland's attitude revealed a strained alertness. He was like a woman sitting beside a driver of skittish horses, saying to herself: "No, I *won't* scream or seize the reins till I must!"

A sneaking impulse pricked me to take the easiest way, by the Rue de Rivoli, and across the Place de la Concorde, but I shook myself free of it, and with high resolve turned the car towards the Boulevards, determined that, if Molly won her bet, it should be well won. A sailor steering a quivering smack towards harbour in a North Sea hurricane; an Indian guiding a bark canoe through the leaping rapids of a swollen river: to both of these I likened myself as the dragon threaded in and out among the adverse streams of traffic. The great crossing

by the Opéra was a whirling maelstrom; a policeman with a white staff, scowled when he should have pitied; I felt alone in chaos before the creation of the world. As for Noah and his ark, not an experience could he have had that I might not have capped it before I reached the Bois.

If I have a guardian spirit, I am sure that to numberless other good qualities he adds the skill of an accomplished motorist; for if he did not get the car to Madrid, without a single scratch upon her brilliant body, I do not know who did. I have no distinct memories, after the first, yet when we arrived at our destination, Gotteland generously complimented me, and as I did not care to go into psychological explanations, I accepted his eulogium. It was Jack, not Molly, who paid for the dinner at Madrid, and it was a good one.

Next morning early we started on our way again, Jack driving, and I watching his prowess. I was now as anxious to meet dogs belligerently inclined towards motors, as I had been to avoid them, but it was not until we were well past Fontainebleau that the chance for which I yearned, arrived. Suddenly we came upon a yard of Dachshund wandering lizard-like across the road, accompanied by a pert Spitz. The waddler prudently retired, but the Spitz, with all the disproportionate courage of a knight of old attacking a fire-breathing dragon, lanced himself in front of the car. After all, what are dragons but strange, new things which we know nothing about and therefore detest? This brave little knight detested us, and with magnificent self-confidence essayed to punish us for troubling his existence.

My hand flew to my pocket, but paused, even as it grasped the water pistol. The dog was small, the

weapon large. A fierce jet of water propelled from its muzzle might blow the breath from that tiny body, which my sole wish was to warn from under the wheels of Juggernaut. However, he was persistent, and was in real danger, since to avoid an approaching cart, Jack was forced to steer perilously near the yapping beast.

I snatched the weapon, pulled the trigger, and—a mild, mellifluous trickle which would have disgraced a toilet vaporiser sprayed forth. Jack, Molly, and the peasants in the approaching cart burst into shouts of laughter. The Spitz, undismayed by the gentle shower, which had spattered his nose with a drop or two, leaped at the weapon, and, irritated, I flung it at his head. It fell innocuously in the road and our last sight of the Spitz was when, rejoined by his lizard friend, he industriously gnawed at the pistol, mistaking it for a bone, while the Dachs gratefully lapped up the water I had provided. My surprise was a popular success, but not the kind of success which I had planned. Jack said that he could have "told me so" if I had asked him, and I vowed in future to let dogs delight to bark and bite without interference from me.

The one inept remark which Shelley seems ever to have made was that "there is nothing to see in France." My opinion, as we spun along the road which would lead us to Lucerne and my waiting mule, was that there was almost too much to see, too much charm, too much beauty for the peace of mind of an imaginative traveller; there were so many valleys which one longed to explore, in which one felt one could be content without going farther, so many blue glimpses of mysterious mountains, veiled by the haze of dreamland, that one suffered a constant suc-

cession of acute pangs in thinking that one would probably never see them again, that one would need at least nine long lives if one were to spend, say, even a month in each place.

Molly advised me not to be a spendthrift of my emotions, at this stage of the journey, lest I should be a worn-out wreck before the grandest part came, but the idea of husbanding enthusiasm did not commend itself to me. Why not enjoy this moment, instead of waiting until the moment after next? It was too much like saving up one's good clothes for "best," a lower-middle-class habit which I have detested since the days when I howled for my smartest Lord Fauntleroy frills in the morning.

There were sweet villages where they made cheese, and where I could have been happy making it with Helen Blantock; there were châteaux with turret rooms where my book shelves would have fitted excellently; but always we fled on, on, until at last, after two bewildering, cinematographic days, we drove into the streets of that dignified and delightful city, Bern.

It had not been necessary for us to pass through Bern; it was, in fact, a few yards more or less out of the most direct path. We chose this route simply and solely with the view of paying a visit to the Bears. Molly had never met them; I had neglected them since childhood; Jack looked forward to the pleasure of introducing them to his wife.

It was on our way to call upon the Bears, that destiny seduced me to turn my head at a certain moment, and look into a shop window. Suddenly the flame of my desire for the walking solo with a mule accompaniment (somewhat diminished lately, I confess) leaped up anew. There were things in

that window which made a man long to be a hermit.

"Mrs. Winston," I cried (Molly was driving), "for goodness' sake stop."

In an instant the car slowed down. "What is the matter?" she implored. "Are you ill? Have we run over anything?"

"No, but look there," I said eagerly. "What an outfit for a camping tour! My mouth waters only at sight of it."

"Greedy fellow," commented Jack from the tonneau. "Drive on, Molly. Get him past the shop. He doesn't really want any of those things, and wouldn't use them if he had them. The sooner he forgets the better."

"Never shall I forget that Instantaneous Breakfast for an Alpiniste," I fiercely protested, "and I will have it at any cost. I know there's no other shop on the Continent like this, and I shall buy an outfit for myself and mule, here, if I have to come back from Lucerne by train for it."

"Hang your mule!" exclaimed Jack. "I was hoping you'd forgotten all about him by this time, and had made up your mind to go on with us indefinitely."

I saw reproach blaze through the talc triangle in Molly's mushroom. (Yet I thought she liked me, and had not, thus far, found "three a crowd.")

"Lord Lane isn't a *chameleon,* Jack," said she, "that he should change his mind every few minutes. *Of course* he's going to have his mule trip. And as for this shop, all those dear little pots and kettles and things in the window are too cute for words. He *shall* have them."

Was I to be a bone of contention between husband and wife?

"Please, both of you come in and help me choose," I meekly pleaded, in haste to restore the peace which I had broken.

We got out, and a small crowd collected round the car, Gotteland standing by with his chin raised and the exact expression of the frog footman in "Alice in Wonderland." One would have said that he saw, afar off, the graves of his ancestors, on the summit of some lonely mountain.

It was what Molly would have called a "lovely" shop, and it did business under the strange device: "Magasin Suisse d'Equipment Sportif." The name alone was worth the money one would spend. Everything to cover the outer, and nourish the inner sportsman, was to be had. I felt that I could scarcely be lonely or sad if I possessed a stock of these friendly articles. Jack's ribald advice to buy a pelerine, and a green-loden Gemsjäger hat with a feather, stirred me neither to smiles nor anger, for Molly and I were already deep in exploration.

The first thing I bought was a mule-pack. Being a merciful man, I chose one of medium size, for already I could fancy myself becoming fond of the animal which was to be my companion in many wild and solitary places, and I did not wish to overburden him. I then, aided and abetted by Molly, began to choose the pack's contents.

An "*Appareil de cuisson alpin, Idéal*" went without saying, like the air one breathes. It composed itself, according to the voluble attendant who displayed it, of six parts, each part far better than the others. There was a *gamelle,* with a "*crochet pour l'enlever*" and a *couvercle,* which, not to show itself

proud, would lend its services also as an *assiette* or a *poêle à frire*. There was the burner of alcohol; there was "*le couvercle de celui-ci,*" which served equally to measure the spirit, and there was a charming *appareil brise vent* which had the air of defying tornadoes. When I had secured this treasure, Molly drew my attention to a series of aluminium boxes made to fit eggs and sandwiches. I bought these also, and, pleased with the clean white metal, invested in plates, goblets, and water bottles of the same. Next came a *couvert pliant,* containing knife, fork, and spoon; and, lest I should be guilty of selfishness, I ordered a duplicate for the man who would look after the mule. Best of all, however, were the tinned soups, meats, vegetables, puddings, and cocoas, which you simply set on the fire in their bright little cans, and heated till they sent forth a steamy fragrance. Then you ate or drank them, and were happy as a king.

Molly and I selected a number of these, and completed the list with a sleeping bag and a *tente de touriste,* which she persuaded me would be indispensable when lost in the mountains, as I was sure to be, often.

When my goods and chattels came to be collected, we were shocked to find that the mule-pack would not contain them. The question remained, then, whether I should sacrifice these new possessions, already dear, or whether I should doom my mule to carry a greater burden. The attendant intimated that Swiss mules preferred heavy loads, and had they the vocal gifts of Balaam's ass, would demand them. Swayed by my desires and his arguments, I changed my pack for a larger one. After more than an hour in the shop, we tore ourselves away, leaving

word that the things should be sent by post to Lucerne. We then repaired to the Bear Pit, by way of the Clock, and having supplied ourselves with plenty of carrots, had no cause to complain of our reception.

CHAPTER V

In Search of a Mule

"Yes, we await it, but it still delays, and then we suffer."
—Matthew Arnold.

"When I arose and saw the dawn, I sighed for thee . . .
Come, long-sought!"
—Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Jack no longer attempted to dissuade me from my walking tour. Whether Molly had talked to him, or whether he had, unprompted, seen the error of his ways, I cannot tell, but the fact remains that, during the rest of our run to Lucerne, he showed a lively interest in the forthcoming trip.

"I suppose," said he, when we had caught our first sight of Pilatus (seen, as one might say, on his back premises), "I suppose that anywhere in Switzerland, there ought to be no trouble about finding a good pack-mule. Somehow one thinks of Switzerland and mules together, just as one does of bacon and eggs, or nuts and raisins, and yet, I can't recall ever having come across any mules in Lucerne, can you, Monty?"

"No," I admitted, "but there were probably so many that one didn't notice them—like flies, you know."

"Of course, the air of Switzerland is dark with mules and donkeys," said Molly, who always seemed quick to resent any obstacles thrown between me and my mule. "One sees them in picture books. All

that Lord Lane will have to say is, 'Let there be mules,' and there will be mules—strings of them. He will only have to pick and choose. The thing will be to get a good one, and a nice, handsome, troubadour-sort of man who can cook, and jodel, and sew, and put up tents, and keep off murderers in mountain passes at night. It may take a day or two to find exactly what is wanted."

"The best person in Switzerland to give Monty all the information he needs," said Jack, evidently not wholly convinced, "is Herr Widmer, who has an hotel high above Lucerne, on the Sonnenberg. He has another in Mentone, and I've heard him tell how he has often come up from the Riviera to Switzerland on horseback. He would be able to advise Monty exactly how to go."

"Let's stop at his place on the Sonnenberg, then," said Molly, who never took more than sixty seconds to make the most momentous decisions, less important ones getting themselves arranged while slow-minded English people drew breath.

Certainly, as we drove through the streets of Lucerne, we saw neither mules nor donkeys, but Molly accounted for this by saying that no doubt they were all at dinner. In any case, with the blue lake a-glitter with silver sequins dropped from the gowns of those sparkling White Ladies, the mountains; the shops gay and bright in the sunshine, on one side the way, shadows lying cool and soft under the long line of green trees on the other, who could take thought of absent mules? Let them dine or die; it mattered not. Lucerne was beautiful, the day divine.

When we were lunching on the balcony of the Winstons' private sitting-room at the Sonnenberg,

with mountains billowing round and below us, I saw that there was something on Molly's mind, for she was *distraite*. Suddenly she said, "Before you talk to Herr Widmer about your mule, don't you think that you had better decide absolutely upon your route?"

"But, darling," objected Jack, "that is largely what he wants advice about."

"He can't do better than take mine, then," said Molly. "Lord Lane, *promise* me you'll take mine and *no* one's else."

"Of course I'll promise," I answered recklessly, for her eyes were irresistible, and any man would have been enraptured that so exquisite a creature should interest herself in his fate. "It doesn't much matter to me where I go, so long as I can moon about in the mountains, and eventually, before I'm old and grey, bring up on the Riviera."

"Well, then," said Molly, "since you are so accommodating, I not only advise but *order* you to go over the Great St. Bernard Pass, down to Aosta."

"Might a humble mortal ask, 'Why Aosta?'" I ventured.

"Because it's beautiful, and beneficent, and a great many other things which begin with B."

"You've never seen it, though," said Jack.

"But I've always wanted to see it, and as you and I have another programme to carry out at present, it would be nice if Lord Lane would go, and tell us all about it. He's promised me to keep a sort of diary, for our benefit later."

"I saw the Duchess of Aosta married at Kingston-on-Thames," I reflected aloud. "She was a very pretty girl. What am I to do after I've made my pilgrimage to her country—about which, by the

way, I know practically nothing except that there's a poster in railway stations which represents it as having bright pink mountains and a purply-yellow sky?"

"Oh, after Aosta, I've no instructions," replied Molly, as if she washed her hands of me and of my affairs. "For the rest, let Fate decide." As she spoke, she looked mystic, sibylline, and I could almost fancy that before her dreamy eyes arose a vision of my future as if floating in a magic crystal. For an instant I was inclined to beg that she would prophesy, but the mood passed. All that I asked or expected to get from the future was a mule, a man, some mountains, and forgetfulness.

It was decided, then, that the only questions to be put to Herr Widmer should concern the mule. I had a vague dream of presently standing on the balcony, while various muleteers and their well-groomed animals passed in review under my eyes, but the landlord's first words struck at my hopes and left them maimed.

"There are no mules to be had in Lucerne," he said.

"In the country near by, then?"

"Nor in the country near by. The nearest place where you could get one would be in the Valais—best at Brig."

"But I don't want to go to Brig," I said forlornly. "If I went to Brig, that would mean that I should have to do a lot of walking afterwards, to reach the parts I wish to reach, through the hot Rhone Valley, where I should be eaten up by gnats and other disagreeable wild beasts. I know the Rhone Valley between Brig and Martigny already, by railway travelling, and that is more than enough."

"The Rhone Valley is a misunderstood valley. Even between Martigny and Brig, it is far more beautiful than anyone who has seen it only from the railway can possibly judge," pleaded Herr Widmer. "It well repays a riding or walking tour."

But my soul girded against the Rhone Valley, and I would not be driven into it by persuasion. "I'd rather put up with a donkey to carry my luggage," said I, with visions of discarding half my Instantaneous Breakfasts, "than begin my walk in the Rhone Valley. Surely, Lucerne can be counted on to yield me up at least a donkey?"

"You must go into Italy to find an *âne*," replied the landlord, inexorable as Destiny.

I suddenly understood how a woman feels when she stamps her foot and bursts into tears. (There are advantages in being a woman.) To be thwarted for the sake of a mere, wretched animal, which I had always looked upon with indifference as the least of beasts! It was too much. My features hardened. Inwardly, I swore a great oath that, if I went to the world's end to obtain it, I would have a pack-mule, or, if worse came to worst, a pack-donkey.

At this bitter moment I chanced to meet Molly's eyes and read in them a sympathy well-nigh extravagant. But I knew why it had been called out. If there is one thing which causes unbearable anguish to a true American girl it is to find herself wanting something "right away" which she cannot have. But luckily for her country's peace, her lovers' happiness, this occurs seldom.

"What is the nearest place in Italy where Lord Lane could get a donkey?" she asked.

"It is possible that he might be able to buy or hire one at Airolo," said our landlord. "At one time

they had them there, for the railway works, and mules also. But now I do not——"

"We can go there and see," said Molly.

"Airolo's on the other side of the St. Gothard, and automobiles aren't allowed on the Swiss passes," remarked Jack.

This, to me, sounded final, so far as Airolo was concerned, but not so with the Honourable Mrs. Winston!

"What do they do to you if you *do* go?" she asked, turning slightly pale.

"They fined an American gentleman who crossed the Simplon in his automobile last year, five thousand francs," answered Herr Widmer.

"Oh!" said she. "So an American did go over one of the passes? Well, thank you *so* much; we must decide what to do, and talk it over with you again later. Meanwhile, we're very happy, for it's lovely here."

Hardly had the door of the sitting-room closed on our host, when Molly, with the air of having a gunpowder plot to unfold, beckoned us both to come near. "I'll tell you what we'll do," said she, in a half-whisper, when surrounded by her body-guard of two. "First, we'll ask *everybody* in Lucerne whether there are any mules or donkeys on the spot, just in case Herr Widmer might be mistaken; if there aren't any, let's go over the St. Gothard *in the middle of the night*."

"Good heavens, what a desperate character I've married!" exclaimed Jack.

"Not at all. Don't you see, at night there would be nobody on their silly old Pass that they make such a fuss about. Even in daylight diligences don't go over the St. Gothard in our times, and at night

there'd be *nothing,* so we couldn't expose man or beast to danger. We'd rush the *douanes,* or whatever they call them on passes, and if we *were* caught, what are five thousand francs?"

"I wouldn't dream of letting you do such a thing for me," I broke in hurriedly. "If Airolo or the neighbourhood turns out to be the happy hunting ground of the sedate mule or pensive *âne,* I will simply take train——"

"You will take the train, if you take it, over Jack's and my dead bodies," remarked Molly coldly.

"It would be rather sport to rush the Pass at night," said Jack.

"Oh, you darling!" cried Molly, "I've never loved you so much."

This naturally settled it.

We walked down to the town by an exquisite path leading through dark, mysterious pine forests, where the slim, straight trunks of the tall trees seemed tightly stretched, like the strings of a great harp, and where melancholy, elusive music was played always by the wind spirits. In Lucerne we did not, as Molly had suggested, ask everybody to stand and deliver information, but we compromised by visiting tourists' bureaux. At these places the verdict was an echo of our landlord's, and I saw that Molly and Jack were glad. Having scented powder, they would have been disappointed if the midnight battle need not be fought.

Molly had never seen Lucerne, which was too beautiful for a fleeting glance. It was arranged that, after driving me over the Pass, for weal or woe, they should return. They would leave most of their luggage at the Sonnenberg, and come back

to spend some days, before continuing their tour as originally mapped out.

We slept that night in peace (it is wonderful how well you do sleep, even with a "mind diseased," after hours of racing through pure, fresh air on a motor car); and next day we began stealthy preparations for our adventure.

CHAPTER VI

The Wings of the Wind

"Oh, still solitude, only matched in the skies;
Perilous in steep places,
Soft in the level races,
Where sweeping in phantom silence the cloudland flies."
—R. Bridges.

The wind howled a menace to Mercédès, as she glided down the winding road towards the comfortable, domestic-looking suburbs of Lucerne. Banks of cloud raced each other across the sky, and, crossing the bridge over the Reuss, we saw that the waters of the Lake, turquoise yesterday, were to-day a sullen indigo. The big steamers rolled at their moorings; white-crested waves were leaping against the quays, and thick mists clung like rolls of wool to the lower slopes of Pilatus.

Molly's spirits rose as the mercury in the barometer fell. "Would you care for people if they were always good-tempered, or weather if it were always fair?" she asked me (we were sitting together in the tonneau, Jack driving). "I revel in storms, and if we have one to-night, when we are on the Pass, one of the dearest wishes of my life will be gratified. 'A storm on the St. Gothard!' Haven't the words a thunder-roll? Sunlight and mountain passes don't belong together. I like to think of great Alpine roads as the fastnesses of giants, who threaten death to puny man when he ventures into their power."

It had been arranged that we should " potter " (as Winston called it) round the arms of the star-fish lake, until we reached Flüelen; that from there we should steal as far as we dared up the Reussthal while daylight lasted, dine at some village inn, and then, instead of returning to the lowlands of Lucerne, make a dash across the mighty barrier that shut us away from Italy. Under a lowering sky, and buffeted by short, sharp gusts of wind, which seemed the heralds of fiercer blasts, we swung along the reedy shores of the narrowing lake, the broken sides of the Rigi standing finely up on our right hand. Winston was satirical about the poor Rigi and its railway, calling it the Primrose Hill and the Devil's Dyke of Switzerland, the paradise of trippers, a mountain whose sides are hidden under cataracts of beer-bottles; but from our point of view, the vulgarities of the maligned mountain were mellowed by distance, and I neither could nor would look upon it as contemptible.

Leaving the Lake of the Forest Cantons, we spun along the margin of the tamer sheet of Zug, to pass, beyond Arth, into the great wilderness caused by the fearful landslide of a century ago, when a mighty mass of rock and earth split off from the main bulk of the Rossberg and thundered down into the valley. The slow processes of nature had done much to cover up decently all traces of the Titan's rage, but the huge, bare scar on the side of the Rossberg still told its tale of tragedy. By the peaceful Lowerzer See the road undulated pleasantly, and at Schwyz (the hub of Swiss history) we had tea, the torn and imposing pyramids of the two Myten bravely rearing their heads above the mists that encumbered the valleys.

There was no need to hurry, for we had the night before us, so we passed slowly, halting often, along the marvellous Axenstrasse, while Jack distilled into Molly's willing ears legends from the old heroic days of Switzerland, before it became the happy haven of hotel-keepers. From the car we could note the characteristics of the Cantons which had entered into the famous bond; pastoral and leafy Unterwalden, with green fields and orchards; Schwyz, also green and fertile; but Uri (the cold, highland partner in this great alliance), a country of towering mountains and savage rocks. Molly wanted to get a boat, and row across to the Rütli to stand on that spot where, in 1307, Walter Fürst, Arnold of Melchthal, and Werner Stauffacher took the famous oath, and very reluctantly she gave up the wish when Jack pointed to the rising waves, painting in lurid colours the sudden and dangerous storms that sweep the Lake of Uri. When he went on, however, to insinuate doubts as to the historic accuracy of these old stories, and to hint that even William Tell might himself be an incorporeal legend, Molly clapped a little hand over his mouth, crying out that even if he had tried to destroy the Maid of Orleans he must spare William Tell. Further on, she made us confide the car to Gotteland on the Axenstrasse, while we descended the path to Tell's chapel and did reverence to the hero's memory. On such a day as this must it have been that Tell leaped ashore from the boat, leaving Gessler to look after himself; for the blasts were shrieking down the lake, and the waves dashed their foam over the ledge where stands the chapel.

Jack stopped several times in the rock galleries of the Axenstrasse before we reached Flü-

elen; consequently it was evening when we slipped into little Altdorf, where Molly insisted on making a curtsey to the statue of Tell and his agreeable little boy. Winston predicted that we should probably not be challenged until we got to Göschenen, as up to that point the road does not take on a true Alpine character. The storm (which seemed rising to a point of fury) was in our favour, too, for no one would choose to be out on such a night, save mad English automobilists and wilful American girls.

Dusk was beginning to shadow the Reussthal, as we ran past the railway station at Erstfeld, and began at length the ascent of the St. Gothard Road. The great railway (of which we had caught glimpses as we came along the lake) was now our companion, while on the other hand roared the tumbling Reuss. So hoarse and insistent was the voice of the stream that Molly suggested it should be "had up for brawling." It did us the service, however, of drowning the noise of our motor, at all times a discreetly silent machine; and as Jack had given orders that the big Bleriots should not be lighted (two good oil lamps showing us the way), we had high hopes that we might fly by unnoticed, on the wings of the storm. In Amsteg no one seemed to look upon us with surprise, and here the road turned, to worm itself into the heart of the mountains, while the railway, often disappearing into tunnels, ran far above our heads.

By the time we had reached Gurtnellen night had fallen black and close, and Molly issued an edict that we should dine in the open air, instead of seeking the doubtful comforts of a village inn, where, too, we might suffer from the solicitude of some officious policeman. The car accordingly was

run under the lee of a great rock, the ever-inspired Gotteland extemporised a shelter with the waterproof rugs, and the blue flame of the chafing-dish presently cheered us with its glow. The wind bellowed along the precipices, the Reuss shouted in its rocky bed, and once an express from Italy to the north passed high above us, streaming its lights through the darkness like sparks from a boy's squib. Yet those plutocratic travellers up in the *wagons lits* were not having anything like the "good time" we enjoyed, warm in our motor coats, sitting snug behind our rock, a lamp from the car illuminating our little party and shining on Molly's piquant profile as she brewed savoury messes in her magic cauldron. This was testing thoroughly the resources of the automobile, which was playing the part of travelling kitchen and larder as well as travelling chariot, and could no doubt be made, with a little ingenuity, to play the parts also of travelling bed and tent. Yet, as I said all this aloud to Jack, my mind leaped forward to other nights which I should soon be spending alone under the stars, and I thought tenderly of my aluminium stove and tent, my sleeping-sack, and the other camping tools I had bought in Bern.

From where we lay hid behind our rock to Airolo was only some thirty-two miles, and the car ate up distance with so voracious an appetite, that it was clear we should arrive in the little Italian town in the dead waste and middle of the night. To travel a forbidden road on an automobile, and then to knock up a snoring innkeeper at one in the morning, to ask him where we could find a donkey, seemed to be straining unduly the sense of humour; so after consultation we decided that we should leave

Airolo to its slumbers and speed down the Pass into Italy until we ran to earth the object of our quest.

Molly had produced excellent coffee; the smoke of our cigarettes mingled its perfume with the night air. Our position had in it something unique, for while we were "in the heart of one of nature's most savage retreats" (as said a guide-book of my boyhood), we were at the same time enjoying the refinements of civilisation, and I suggested to Winston that our bivouac would form a fit subject for a picture labelled, in the manner of some Dutch masters, "Automobilists Reposing."

By the time Gotteland had packed up everything, and we were seated once more in the car, it was nearly eleven o'clock at night. Coming out from the shelter of our rock, so fierce a blast of wind smote us that Molly would, I think, have been carried off her feet had I not given her a steadying arm. We had to cram our caps on our heads, or the wind would have torn them from us, and the voice of the motor was swallowed up in the shrieking of the tempest. Molly was evidently destined to have her wish.

The car ran swiftly up the road to Wasen, and some twinkling lights and a huge crimson eye at the entrance to the great tunnel told us that we had done the ten miles to Göschenen. No one stirred in the streets of the village, and, gliding cat-like past the station, Jack put the car at the beginning of the real ascent of the famous St. Gothard Road. The higher we went, the more wildly roared the storm. There was something appalling in the fierce volleyings of the wind along the stark and broken faces of the precipice: it was like the rattle of thunder. In the sombre defile of the Schöllenen the air

rushed as through a funnel. We could see nothing save the thread-like road illuminated by our steadfast lanterns—the sole beacon of safety in this welter. We had a ghostly impression of winding through a narrow gorge, the river roaring in its depths; then, dashing through an avalanche gallery (where the lights played strange tricks with the vaulted roof), we came out upon the Devil's Bridge. The spray from the Reuss, which here drops a full hundred feet into the abyss, lashed our faces as with whips; the storm leaped at us out of the blackness like a wolf; the car quivered, and for an instant it seemed that we should be hurled against the parapet of the bridge. But we passed unharmed, and a quarter of a mile further on Winston stopped in the welcome shelter of the Urner Loch, a tunnelled passage in the rock.

We gasped out broken expressions of a fearful joy; then, seeing that Molly was well, and that the wind-wolf's teeth had torn nothing from the car, Jack went full speed ahead again, steering along the open Urseren Valley, where we had fleeting glimpses of green fields instead of granite rocks. Thus we came to Andermatt, where not the eye of a mouse seemed open to mark our quick and stealthy passage. We were now on that great mountain highroad that slants in a straight line across almost all Switzerland from Coire to Martigny; but we kept on it only for a little while, to steal through Hospenthal—as dead asleep as the other villages (for Labour had not yet begun to waken in its hard bed), and take the southern road that leads to Italy.

Thus far, audacity had been laurelled by success. It was near one in the morning, and we were spinning fast up a valley which showed bleakly in the

flying lights of our car. Soon Jack called to us that we had crossed the border line of the Canton Ticino, and presently through the blackness twinkled the little lakes which mark the summit of the Pass. We were nearly seven thousand feet above the sea, and suddenly, as we crossed the ridge and began to sail down the dismal Val Tremolo towards Airolo, the great wind that had made majestic music all day and night ceased to blow. We ran into a zone of motionless, ice-cold air, and what seemed an unnatural silence, only the hum of the motor breaking the frozen stillness of these high Alpine solitudes.

The road plunged to lower levels in interminable windings, the car swooping in a series of bird-like flights, exhilarating to the nerves, thrilling to the imagination; for in the blackness that held us we could but guess at abysses which dropped away almost from under the tyres of our wheels. Sometimes we dashed over foaming rivers, and soon we sped through Airolo, where yet no one moved. Now the loud-voiced Ticino was our companion, and we swept down through an open valley to Faido, where we met the first human being we had seen since we left Gurtnellen. It was a very old man, with a red cap, like a stocking, pulled close upon his head. He had a rake on his shoulder, and we were close on him before he knew; for the car was coasting, and ran with hardly any noise save the whir of the chains. For a flashing instant that old face shone out of the circle of our lights, concave with astonishment; then we lost it forever.

"No fear that *he* will telephone to have us stopped lower down," said Molly. "He thinks we are supernatural, and will go home and tell his grandchildren

that he has seen witches tearing home after a revel up among the glaciers."

Faster still the car flew down the road. The air that streamed past us held the faint, elusive perfume of Italy, which softly hints the presence of the walnut, the chestnut, and the grape. Through village after village we swept at speed, our lamps shining now on mulberry and fig trees, and on vines trained over trellises held up by splintered granite slabs. Next we came suddenly upon an Italian-looking town with bad *pavé* and dimly lighted streets, where three or four workmen, early astir, stared at us in bewilderment. It was Bellinzona; but passing through, we came out presently on the margin of an immense sheet of water, and it was only in Locarno on the edge of Lago Maggiore, when dawn was paling the eastern sky, that Jack at last drew rein.

No one was tired; no one wanted to rest. On the contrary, our rapid flight over the Alps had intoxicated us with the sense of speed; and we were all excitedly for going on until we should reach the frontier. As pink dawn blossomed in the sky, like a heavenly orchard, and the mountain tops were beaten into copper, we glided along the edge of the lake, past picturesque villages and *campanili,* and cypress trees. At the Italian frontier there were the usual tedious formalities of payment and sealing the car with a leaden seal; but when all this was done by sleepy officials, surly at our early passage, though little recking of our crimes, we sailed on again, Molly driving now, through a landscape magically clear in the young morning light.

Suddenly we all started in joyous astonishment, and Molly brought the car to a stop. Each had seen the same thing, each had been struck with the same

thought. Here, at last, we had found what we had come so far to seek; what Switzerland denied us, Italy offered. Standing alone in a field by the roadside was a small, dark grey donkey, tethered to a stone; and no other living being was in sight. The creature was not eating; it was only thinking; and it looked at us with an eye that seemed to speak of loneliness and the desire for human fellowship. "The very thing for you!" cried Molly; and the long-sought-for treasure, finding itself observed, flicked one of its heavy ears.

Gotteland and I dismounted and went nearer. As we approached, the donkey nickered; and as its family is famed for reticence, such proof of friendliness made me yearn to possess the deserted little beast. But its legs were very thin, its hoofs exceedingly small, and the thought of loading so frail a structure with the great packs that held my camping kit seemed a barbarity. Meanwhile Gotteland, who knows something of everything, had carefully examined the tiny animal, and just as I was growing sentimental over its perfections, he broke the charm by pronouncing it to be incredibly old, and unfit for work. He also drew my attention to a disagreeable sore upon its shoulder. It was sad; but indisputably the man was right; in any case there was no one with whom a bargain could have been arranged, and with poignant regret I was forced to leave my treasure-trove to its solitary thoughts. After this we did not stop again until Molly steered the car to the door of a beautiful hotel in Pallanza, where the shirt-sleeved concierge hurried into his gold-laced coat, to receive in fitting style the unusually early guests.

My first care, after coffee and a bath, was to ex-

amine the landlord of the hotel on the momentous question of mules and donkeys. At Lucerne, I told him, they had assured me that the animals "flourished" in Canton Ticino and the neighbourhood of the Italian Lakes. But I met with no encouragement. Mules and donkeys were rarely seen in these parts, the host declared. True, a few peasants employed them in the fields; but those were poor things, unfit for an excursion such as Monsieur purposed. At Piedimulera, perhaps, Monsieur would find what he wanted; yes, at Piedimulera, or if not, at Domodossola; or—his face brightened—in the Valais, preferably at Brig. Yes, he was certain that mules and asses in abundance could be found at Brig in the Rhone Valley. Brig! My heart sank. It was the old story. Counterfeiting patience, I explained that I had an antipathy to the Rhone Valley, and had actually crossed the Alps to find animals in Italy rather than be driven to seek them in Brig.

Crushed by a hopeless, answering gesture, I made my report to Molly and Jack. "It will end," I said, "in my traversing the world, and eventually arriving in Japan, still searching the *rara avis*. By that time I shall have become a harmless lunatic, and people will treat my babblings with indulgent forbearance, when I go from house to house begging to be supplied with a pack-mule or a pack-donkey."

At *déjeuner*, in a garden which was a successful imitation of Eden, the situation did not, however, look so dark. The perfume of flowers, distilled by the hot sun, was of Araby the Blest; the Borromean Islands spread their enchantments before us, across a glittering blue expanse of lake, and the world was after all endurable, though empty of mules. Be-

sides, Molly was a sweet consoler. She dwelt on the hopeful suggestion in the name Piedimulera. It could not be wholly deceiving, she argued. Why name a place Foot-of-a-Mule, if there were no mules there?

"If there aren't," I exclaimed, "I swear to you that I will, by fair means or foul, dispose of at Piedimulera all the things with which I fondly thought to deck the animal my fancy had painted. Everything I bought at Bern shall go, if I have to dig a grave by night in which to bury them. This is a vow, and though my heart be wrung, I'll keep it."

Molly listened to this outburst as gravely as if I had been threatening to sacrifice a son, did not some incredible good fortune supply a ram caught by his horns in the bushes.

For Piedimulera we left in the afternoon, somewhat buoyed up by the omen of the name. The way led back towards the Alps, up a broad and beautiful valley strewn with evidences of the works for the Simplon railway: embankments, bridges, quarries, and occasional groups of workmen hauling rhythmically on the many ropes of a pile-driver. Presently we swerved from the main road, and crossed the valley bed, obedient to the map, which was our only guide to Piedimulera. We passed one or two romantically placed, ancient villages, each of which I hoped might be our goal; but, as usual in life, the town for which we were bound did not appear as alluring as other towns, where we had no need to stop.

"I feel there will be not so much as the ghost of a long-perished Roman mule in this hamlet," I said despondently, hoping that Molly would contradict me. But she, too, looked anxious, now that the

great moment had come, for we were driving into a town, at the mouth of a deep gorge already dusky with purpling shadows, and there was no doubt that it was Piedimulera.

The gloom of the twilight settled upon our spirits, dissimulate as we might, as the car swept into the cobble-paved courtyard of an *albergo,* a venerable grandfather of a hostelry, old, grim, and forbidding. Out came a large, fair man to welcome us, with calculation in his cold grey eye. He looked to me like a spider in his web, greeting some inviting flies. We broke the ice by asking for coffee, and when we were told that we must have it without milk, as there were no cows within a radius of many miles, I would have staked all my possessions (especially those acquired at Bern) that there would be no such comparatively useless animals as mules or donkeys.

Instinct is seldom wrong. If ever there was nothing in a name, there was nothing in that of Piedimulera, which had evidently been applied in sheer mockery, or because, untold generations ago, the foot of that rare creature, a mule, had been preserved here in a museum. When the landlord found that we did not intend to stop overnight, unless mules were at once forthcoming, he visibly lost interest in us, as inedible insects. He shrugged his shoulders at the bare idea that Piedimulera might shelter such creatures as we were mad enough to desire, and assured us that there was not the least use in trying Domodossola. We had much better spend the night with him, and to-morrow morning go on as best we might to Brig. No? Then he washed his hands of us.

I did not give my treasures to this person;

rather would I have burnt all, than picture him battening on my Instantaneous Breakfasts. Molly would have had me keep them, at least until we knew what fate awaited us at Domodossola. The moment I had irrevocably parted with my outfit, bought in happier days, I should find a mule, and how annoyed would I be, she prophesied. But I was adamant. Had I not made a vow? Besides, if I were to find a mule or donkey the moment I had got rid of his paraphernalia, that alone was an inducement to throw the cargo overboard.

On our way to Domodossola, I saw a pretty dark-eyed young woman, with a cherubic baby in her arms, standing in the doorway of a tumble-down cottage. Evidently she was waiting to greet her husband when he should come home, weary with his long day's work. Quickly I made a decision; and with the same abruptness I had used in urging Molly to draw up before the too attractive shop in Bern, I begged her now to stop. My white elephants were stowed away in separate bundles in the tonneau, where, ever since Lucerne, they had been the cause of cramps and "pins and needles" to the feet of any member of the party who sat there. I ruthlessly collected the lot, and, well-nigh swamped by the load, I carried them to the cottage door, where I laid all at the feet of the young mother. She suddenly became an incarnate point of admiration, and could scarcely believe that I was sane, or that she was not dreaming when I explained my wish to make her a present. If I had stayed an hour, I could not have dissipated her bewilderment, so I left the things to speak for themselves—if she did not take them for infernal machines and throw them into the river.

It was evening when we arrived at Domodossola, and I felt nothing save cold resignation when told emphatically by the concierge of our chosen hotel that my quest was hopeless.

"You will have to go to Brig," he said; and though he was an intelligent and worthy man, I could have smitten him to earth.

"You must abandon me to my fate," I told Jack and Molly. "*Il est trop fort.* If I'm to walk the face of the earth, I want a pack-mule and a man; and, 'somehow, somewhere, somewhen,' I mean to have them. But you've more than done your duty by me. You can get back to Lucerne from here comfortably, without daring any more mountain passes and fines for law-breaking. Since to Brig I must go, I'll make a virtue of necessity, and walk over the Simplon, to see the tunnel and railway works."

"Walk, if you will," said Molly; "but if I know my Lightning Conductor and myself, we'll see you through to the end, be it bitter or sweet."

"Echo answers," added Jack. "If you want to see things clearly, you must have daylight, and if we wish to escape the arm of the law, we must fly by night, which means that we can't join forces till the journey's end."

"You needn't think we're sacrificing ourselves, for we should love it," Molly capped him. "We're having the jam of adventure spread thick on our bread now."

"Well, then, everything's settled," said Jack, "except the start."

Molly thought a day in Domodossola too much. It was decided, therefore, that they should rest till eleven, and that the motor should be ready at midnight. They could reach Brig between two and

three, and being a posting town, the hotel people were sure to be up. I was to start early in the morning, and meet my friends at Brig, after walking over the Pass.

I saw them off, and then plunged fathoms deep into sleep, dreaming of a land flowing with mules and donkeys. At five, I was up, and was surprised to find that the despised Domodossola was a beautiful and interesting old town, with curiously Spanish effects in its shadowy streets, lined with ancient, arcaded houses. I thought to save time and fatigue by taking a carriage to the frontier village of Iselle at the foot of the Pass, and was glad I had done so, for the road was rough and covered inches deep with a deposit of peculiar, grey dust. But things mended when we climbed a hill, turned out of the main valley, and followed the course of the river Diveria into a lateral gorge of the mountains, the real porchway or entrance of the Simplon Pass.

CHAPTER VII

At Last!

"A Jack-o'-lantern, a fairy fire,
A dare, a bliss, and a desire."
—Bliss Carman.

"Here a great personal deed has room."
—Walt Whitman.

The further I penetrated into the mountains, the more like a vast engineering workshop did the long Alpine valley become. Yet, curiously enough, instead of destroying romance, this gave a certain majestic romance of its own; the romance of man's struggle to conquer the stupendous forces of Nature with his science. It was as if Vulcan's stithy had been dropped down into a profound ravine of the Alps, and the drone of machinery mingled with the music of the fleeting river—a strange diapason.

On the right of the highroad, the flat mountain face opened a black, egg-shaped mouth at me. I got out of the carriage to approach it, and while I stood peering down the dark throat, as if I were a Lilliputian doctor examining the tongue of Giant Gulliver, I was suddenly clapped upon the shoulder. It flashed into my mind that perhaps it was forbidden to stare at the tunnel-in-making; and turning to defend myself from a lash of red tape, with the adage that "a cat may look at a king," I saw a man I had known years ago smiling at me.

I have a worldly-minded cousin who says that she

is always nice to girls, because "you never know whom they may marry." It might be equally diplomatic to be nice to foreigners who are at Oxford with you, because you don't know that they may not become famous engineers, able to show you interesting things when you visit their country. Giovanni Bolzano had been at Balliol with me, studying English, and now it turned out that he was second engineer to the works for the new tunnel. I recalled with poignant regret that Jack Winston and I had once made hay of his room; but evidently he bore no malice, for after saying that he was not surprised to see me, as everybody came this way sooner or later, he offered to show me his tunnel, of which this was the Italian mouth. It had another at Brig, twelve miles away, and boasted the longest throat in the world, but as it was marvellously ventilated, it would never choke in its own smoke, and Bolzano was very proud of the engineering achievement. Having discharged my carriage, I went with him into a workshop, heard the humming of dynamos, and the buzzing of tremendous turbines, actuated by the fall of the river Diveria, and gazed with the fascination of a mouse for a cat at a huge and diabolical fan, driving air into the tunnel. This fearful beast had a house to itself, with a passage down which you could venture like Theseus entering the labyrinth of the Minotaur; but such was the volume of breath which it drew into its mighty lungs that you must use all your strength not to be sucked in and hurled against the shafting; all your self-control not to be confused by its loud, unceasing roar.

Hardly had we come out from this weird place, which would have given Edgar Allan Poe an inspiration for a creepy tale, when Bolzano showed me a

relief gang of men getting ready to enter the tunnel, in a train consisting of wooden boxes drawn by a miniature locomotive. This was my chance. I was hurried off to his quarters, helped into rough, miner's clothing, with great boots up to my knees, and given a miner's lamp. Then, joining the eight hundred Italians,—a battalion of the soldiers of Labour,—we got into a box, and set off to relieve eight hundred other such soldiers who for eight hours had toiled in the schisty heart of the mountain.

I felt as if suddenly, between sleeping and waking, I had plunged deep into the dusk of dreamland. We rumbled through a lofty egg-shaped vault, lined with masonry, lighted waveringly, with strange play of shadow, by our many lamps. This phase of the dream seemed to last a long time; and then the train of boxes slowed down, for we had reached the danger-point, a part of the tunnel where the hidden Genii of the Mountain had planned a trap to upset all geological expectations. Having allowed the engineers to penetrate thus far, they had suddenly flooded the tunnel with cataracts of water from fissures in the rock, and had laughed wild, echoing laughter because they had contrived to delay the work for a year, and cause the spending of much extra money.

The dream showed me now a long iron cage, shoring up the crumbling walls of the excavation; and through this cage we crept like a procession of wary mice, suddenly putting on speed at the end, till we reached the tunnel-head, and found another train preparing to go out.

Here the dream flung me into a teeming Inferno of darkness and lost spirits who (spent with eight

hours' monotonous toil in this Circle) had dropped asleep, sitting half-naked in the line of boxes which would bear them away to a spell of rest. They had fallen into pathetic attitudes of collapse, some lying back with their mouths open, some resting their heads on folded arms, some drooping on comrades' shoulders.

As our train-load of Activity came to a stand, this other train-load of Exhaustion rumbled slowly away, the smoky lamps glinting on polished, olive-coloured flesh, on hairy arms, and swarthy faces shut to consciousness.

Close to the tunnel-head we alighted, and went on into the dream on foot, the gallery contracting to a few feet in height, where a group of black figures bent over rock-drills which creaked and groaned. I saw the drill-holes filled with dynamite, and retired with the others while the fuse was lighted. I heard from afar off the thunderous detonations as the rock-face was shattered. I saw the débris being cleared away, before the drills should begin to grind again; and the remembrance that, in another rat-hole on the Swiss side, another party of workers was patiently advancing towards us, in precisely the same way, sent a mysterious thrill through my blood.

"Suppose the two galleries don't meet end to end?" I spoke out my thought.

"But they will," said Bolzano. "Our calculations are precise, and we have allowed for an error of two inches: I do not think there will be more. There is a great system of triangulation across the mountains, and every few months our reckonings are verified. By-and-bye, we shall hear the sound of each other's drills; then, down will come the last

dividing wall of rock, and Swiss and Italians will be shaking hands."

I think, in coming out of the dark tunnels and windy galleries, I felt somewhat as Jonah must have felt after he had been discarded in distaste by the whale. The light dazzled my eyes. I could have shouted aloud with joy at sight of the sun. I made Bolzano breakfast with me in the little inn at Iselle, and got upon my way again, at something past noon. The vast turmoil of the growing railway was left behind. It was like putting down a volume of Walt Whitman, and taking up Tennyson.

The Pass had the extraordinary individuality of one face as compared with another. It had not even a family resemblance to the St. Gothard. The air was sweet with the good smell of newly cut wood and resinous pines. There were sudden glimpses of icy peaks, cut diamonds in the sun, seen for a moment, then swallowed up by stealthily creeping white clouds, or caressed by them with a benediction in passing. Thin streaks of cascades on precipitous rocks made silver veinings in ebony. Side valleys opened unexpectedly, and one knew from hearsay that gold mines were hidden there. Treading the road built by Napoleon, I was enveloped in the gloom of the wondrous Gondo Schlucht, to come out into a broad valley,—a green amphitheatre, above which a company of white, mountain gods sat grouped to watch a cloud-fight.

If I had not been heart-broken by the cruelty of Helen Blantock, I should have been almost minded to thank her for sending me here. But then,—I reminded myself hastily when this thought winked at me over my shoulder,—I was stunned still, by my heavy disappointment. I was not conscious to the

full of my suffering now, but I should wake up to it by-and-bye, and then it would be awful—as awful as the desolation left by a recent great avalanche whose appalling traces I had just seen.

I refused to be interested in the old Hospice of St. Bernard, or the newer Hospice, built by order of Napoleon, because neither seemed to me the real thing. If I could not see the Hospice of St. Bernard on the Pass of Great St. Bernard, I would not see any other hospices called by his name. If possible, I would have gone by them with my eyes shut; but at the new Hospice the yapping of a dozen adorable puppies in a kennel opposite lured me, and I paused to talk to them. They did not understand my language, and this was disappointing; but if I had not stopped I should have missed a short cut which I half saw, half suspected, dimly zigzagging down the mountain into an extraordinarily deep valley, and tending in the direction of Brig. It would have been a pity to pass it by, for though I often thought myself lost, I eventually caught sight of a town, lying far below, which could be no other than the one for which I was bound. After three hours of fast walking down from the Hospice, I plunged through an old archway into the main street of Brig.

Coming into it, I stopped to gaze up in astonishment at an enormous house which looked to me as big as Windsor Castle. Indeed, to call it a house does not express its personality at all; yet it was hardly magnificent enough for a castle. At each corner was an immense tower, ornamented with a big bulb of copper, like a gigantic and glorified Spanish onion. A beautiful Renaissance gallery, flung across from one tall building to another, lent grace to the otherwise too solid pile, and I guessed

that I must have come upon the ancient stronghold and mansion of the famous Stockalper family, still existing and still one of the most important in Switzerland. In the Pass I had seen the towers built by the first Stockalper—that Gaspar who in mediæval days was called "King of the Simplon"; who protected travellers and controlled the caravan traffic between Italy and Switzerland; now, to see the house which he had founded still occupied by his descendants, fixed more pictorially in my mind the stirring legends connected with the man.

The little town of Brig seemed noisy and gay after the great silence of the Pass. Church bells were ringing, whips were cracking; in the central place there were crowding shops, bright with colour, and lights were beginning to shine out from the windows of the hotels.

I was to meet the Winstons at the Hôtel Couronne; and as I ventured to show my travel-stained person in the hall, I was greeted by a vision: Molly in white muslin, dressed for dinner.

"What, you already!" she exclaimed. "You must have come over the Pass by steam or electricity. We didn't expect you for an hour. We've lots to tell you, and oh, I've bought you a sweet revolver, which you are always to have about you, on your walking trip, though Jack laughed at me for doing it. But now, for your adventures."

In a few words I sketched them, and learned that the motor had again pulled wool over the eyes of the law; then Molly must have seen in mine that there was a question which I wished, but hesitated, to ask. If a man may have a beam in his eye, why not a mule?

"We've been interviewing animals of various

sorts for you all day," she said. "I've had a kind of employment agency for mules, and have taken their characters and capacities. But——"

"There's a 'but,' is there?" I cut into her ominous pause.

"Well, the nicest beasts are all engaged for days ahead, or else their owners can't spare them for a long trip; or else they're too young; or else they're too old; or else they're *hideous*. At least, there's one who's hideous, and I'm sorry to say he's the only one you can have."

"'"'Twas ever thus, from childhood's hour.'"

"But the landlord says there are dozens of mules at Martigny."

"A mere mirage."

"No, he has telephoned. But you'll look at the one here, I suppose, if only as a matter of form? I think he's outside now."

"Let him be brought before me," I said, with the air of a tyrant in a melodrama; and, by the way, I have always thought it would be very pleasant being a tyrant by profession, like Him of Syracuse, for instance. You could do all the things you wanted to do, without consulting the convenience of anybody else, or having it on your conscience that you hadn't.

At this moment Jack appeared. It seemed that he had been putting the mule (the one available mule) through his paces, and the wretched fellow was laughing. "It's not funny, at all," said I, thinking it was the situation which amused him. But Jack explained that it wasn't that. "It's the brute's tail," said he. "When you see it, you'll know what I mean."

I did know, at sight. The organ—if a mule's tail can be called an organ—had mean proportions and a

hideous activity which expressed to my mind a base and depraved nature. Had there been no other of his kind on earth, I would still have refused to take this beast as my companion; and after a few moments' feverish discussion, it was arranged that after all we must go through the Rhone Valley to-morrow to Martigny.

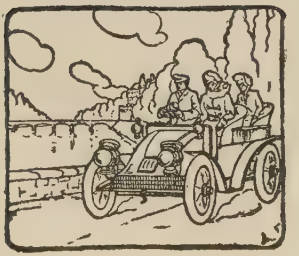
But the Rhone Valley, radiant in morning light, heaped coals of fire upon my head. I had maligned perfection. There was all the difference between the country between Brig and Martigny seen from a railway-carriage window, and seen from a motor car, that there is between the back of a woman's head when she is giving you the cut direct, and her face when she is smiling on you.

The Rhone Valley tame! The Rhone Valley monotonous! It was poetry ready for the pen of Shelley, and a scene for the brush of Turner. The little towns sleeping on the shoulders of the mountains, or rising turreted from hardy rocks bathed by the golden river; the peeps up cool lateral valleys to blue glaciers; the near green slopes and distant, waving seas of snowy splendour left a series of pictures in the mind; and best of all was Martigny's tower pointing a slender finger skyward from its high hill.

Late in the afternoon, as the car whirled us into the garden of the Hôtel Mont Blanc, we came face to face with two mules. They had brought back a man and a girl from some excursion. The landlord was at the door to receive his guests. Jack, Molly, and I flung the same question at his head, at the same moment. Was the situation as it had been when he telephoned? Could I hire a mule and a man, not for a day or two, but for a long journey—a journey half across the world if I liked?

The answer was that I might have five mules and five men for a journey all across the world if it were my pleasure.

It sounded like a problem in mental arithmetic, but I thanked my stars that there seemed no further need for me to struggle over its solution.



CHAPTER VIII

The Making of a Mystery

"There was the secret . . .
Hid in . . . grey, young eyes."
—Alice Meynell.

"Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more."
—Walt Whitman.

In my opinion it is a sign of strength rather than of weakness, to change one's mind with a good grace. For my part, I find pleasure in the experience, feeling refreshed by it, as if I had had a bath, and got into clean linen after a hot walk. Changing the mind gives also somewhat the same sensation as waking in the morning with the consciousness that no one on earth has ever seen this day before; or the satisfaction one has on breaking an egg, the inside of which no human eye has beheld until that moment. A change of mind bestows on one for the time being a new Ego; therefore I did not grudge myself my delight in the once despised Rhone Valley. Nevertheless, I was glad that the Mule of Brig had been one with which I could conscientiously decline to associate. My resolve not to take a pack-mule there had become so fixed, that to have uprooted it would have seemed a confession of failure. Besides, the need to go on to Martigny had given an excuse for another day with Jack, Molly, and Mercédès.

I had been as happy as a man whose duty it is to

be broken-hearted, may dare to be. But the next morning came at Martigny, and with my bath the news that the five promised men with their five mules awaited my choice.

I had secretly hoped that the day might be muleless till evening, for in that case Jack and Molly would probably stay on, and I should not be left alone in the world until to-morrow.

However, it was not to be. I gave myself the satisfaction of keeping the mules waiting, on the principle of always doing unto others what they have done unto you; and after a leisurely toilet, I went down to hold the review.

Four men, with four mules, started forward eagerly, jostling each other, at sight of me accompanied by the landlord. But one held back a little, with a modest dignity, as if he were too proud to push himself into notice, or too generous to exalt himself at the expense of others. He was a slim, dark man of middle height, past thirty in age, perhaps, with a look of the soldier in the bearing of his shoulders and head. He had very short black hair; high cheekbones, where the rich brown of his skin was touched with russet; deep-set, thoughtful eyes, and a melancholy droop of the moustache. His collar was incredibly tall and shiny, with turn-down points; he wore a red tie; his thick brown clothes might have been bought ready made in the Edgeware Road; evidently he had honoured the occasion with his Sunday best. While his comrades jabbered together, in patois which flung in a French word now and then, like a sop to Cerberus, he spoke not a word; yet I saw his lips tighten, as he laid his arm over the neck of a small but well-built mule of a colour which matched its master's clothing. The animal rubbed

a brown velvet head against the brown waistcoat which, perhaps, covered a fast-beating heart. From that instant I knew that this was my man, and this my mule, as certainly as if they had been tattooed with my family crest and truculent motto: "What I will, I take."

"You've been a soldier, haven't you?" I asked the muleteer in French.

He saluted as he replied that he had, and that for several years he had served a French general, as orderly. His name was Joseph Marcoz, and—he added—he was a Protestant.

"And your mule?" I asked.

"Finois, Monsieur."

"Ah, but his persuasion? He is Protestant, too?" If Joseph had looked puzzled, I should have been disappointed, but a spark of humour lit the gloom of his sombre eye. "Finois is Pantheist, I think you call it, Monsieur. I am persuaded that he has a soul, for which there will be a place in the Beyond; and if he goes there first, I hope that he will be looking out for me."

It seemed a sudden drop, after this preface, to turn to bargaining. The landlord made the break for me, however, when he saw that I had set my mind upon Marcoz and his Finois. It then appeared that Joseph was not his own master, but worked for the real owner of Finois and other mules. The price he would have to ask for such a journey as I proposed was twenty-five francs a day. This would include the services of man and mule, food for the one, and fodder for the other. Without any beating down, I accepted the terms proposed, and the only part of the arrangement left in doubt was the time of starting. It was not eight o'clock, yet already the diligences

and private carriages going over the Grand St. Bernard had departed with a jingling of bells and sharp cracking of whips which had first informed me that it was day. With me, it was different, however. Speed was no longer my aim. I would not be in a hurry about arriving anywhere, and when I learned that there were a couple of small towns on the Pass, at either of which I could lie for a night, there seemed no fair excuse for keeping Jack and Molly at Martigny.

As I was wondering when they would wake, that I might consult them on the details of my journey, I glanced up and saw Molly, as fresh as if she had been born with the morning, standing on a balcony just over my head. In her hand was a letter, and as she waved a greeting, something came fluttering uncertainly down. I managed to catch this something before it touched earth, and had inadvertently seen that it was an unmounted photograph, probably taken by an amateur correspondent, when Molly leaned over the railing, with an excited cry, "Oh, don't look. Please, *please* don't look at that photograph!" she exclaimed.

"Of course I won't," I answered, slightly hurt. "What do you take me for?"

"I know you wouldn't mean to," she answered. "But you might glance involuntarily. You *didn't* see it, did you?"

Suddenly I was tempted to tease her. "Would it be so very dreadful if I did?"

"Yes, dreadful," she echoed solemnly. "Don't joke. Do please tell me, one way or the other, if you saw what was in the picture?"

"You may set your mind at ease. If it were to save my life, I couldn't tell whether the photograph

was of man, woman, boy, girl, or beast; and now I'm holding it face downward."

Molly broke into a laugh. "Good!" she exclaimed. "I'm coming to claim my property, and to look at your new acquisitions. I've been criticising them from the window, and I congratulate you."

A moment later she was beside me, had taken her mysterious photograph, and hidden it between the pages of a letter, covered with writing in a pretty and singularly individual hand. She explained that a whole budget of "mail" had been forwarded to Martigny, in consequence of a telegram sent to Lucerne, and then, as if forgetting the episode, she applied herself to winning the hearts of the man Joseph and the mule Finois.

Presently we were joined by Winston, and I broached the subject of the start. "The idea is," I said, "to begin as I mean to go on, with a walk of from twenty to thirty miles a day, according to the scenery and my inclination. Marcoz thinks that we could pass the night comfortably enough at a place called Bourg St. Pierre, even if we didn't get away from here for an hour or so. Then early to-morrow we would push on for the Hospice, and reach Aosta in the evening."

"It would be a mistake to leave here in the heat of the day, don't you think so?" said Jack. "Much better if we all stopped on, did some sightseeing, and then Molly and I bade you good speed about half-past seven to-morrow morning."

"But, Lightning Conductor, you forget we can't stay. You know—*the letters,*" said Molly, with one of those deep, meaning glances which her lovely eyes had more than once sent Jack, when there was some question as to our ultimate parting. My heart

invariably responded to this glance with a pang, as a nerve responds to electricity. She wished to go away with her Lightning Conductor, and leave me at the mercy of a mule. Well, I would accept my lonely lot without complaining, but not without silently reflecting that happy lovers are selfish beings at best.

The forlorn consciousness that I was of superlative importance to no one was heavy upon me. I wanted somebody to care a great deal what became of me, and evidently nobody did. I was horribly homesick at breakfast, and the Winstons' gaiety in the face of our parting seemed the last straw in my burden. Perhaps Molly saw this straw in my eyes, for she looked at me half wistfully for a moment, and then said, "If we weren't sure this walking trip of yours will do you more good than anything else, we wouldn't let you leave us, for we have loved having you. We'll write to you at Aosta, where you will be staying for a couple of days, and give you our itinerary, with lots of addresses. By that time, you too will have made up your mind about your route. You will have decided whether to branch off among the bye-ways, or go straight on south, although you mustn't go *too* quickly, and get there too early——"

"I don't believe I shall have made up my mind to anything in Aosta," said I gloomily. "I feel that I shall still be unequal to that, or any other mental effort, and what is to become of me, Heaven, Joseph, and Finois alone know."

"Now, isn't it funny, I feel exactly the opposite? Something seems to tell me that at Aosta, if not before, you will, so to speak, 'read your title clear,'" said Molly, with aggravating cheerfulness. "As

soon as you've settled what way to take, you must write or wire; and who knows but by-and-bye we shall cross each other's path again, on the road to the Riviera?"

I revived a little. "I don't think you told me that you were going to run down there. Jack was talking about keeping mostly to Switzerland, I thought."

"But Switzerland will turn a cold shoulder upon us, as the autumn comes to spoil its disposition, and we were saying only this morning that it would be fine to make a rush to the Riviera, for a wind up to our trip."

"You see, Molly had a letter——" Jack had begun to speak with an absent-minded air, but suddenly recovered himself. "We don't care to get back to England till November," he hastily went on. "I want Molly to have some hunting and a jolly round of country houses just to see what we can do to make an English winter tolerable. We've got four or five ripping invitations, and in January Mistress Molly herself will have to play hostess to a big house party, at Brighthelmston Park, which the mater and governor have lent us till next season."

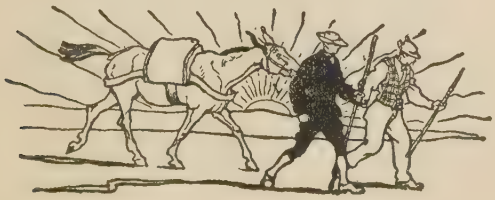
If he had wanted to take my mind off an inadvertence, he could scarcely have manœuvred better, but why the inadvertence (if it had been one) could concern me, it was difficult to imagine.

There was a friendly dispute as to whether Molly and Jack should see me off, or whether I should wish them good-bye before starting on my journey; but in the end it was settled that I should be the one to leave first. Perhaps they believed that, if left to myself, I should never start at all; perhaps they wished to add photographs of the mule-party to their Kodak

collection, already large; or perhaps they thought only how to make the parting pleasantest for me, since I had no one, and they had each other.

In any case, at ten o'clock all that was left of my store was placed upon the back of Finois, who had the air of ignoring its existence, and mine as well. Had he been a horse, he would at least have deigned to exchange glances with me, friendly or otherwise; but being what he was, he looked everywhere except at me, as if he had been some haughty aristocrat conscientiously snubbing an offensive upstart. Joseph appeared to be the one human being of more importance for Finois than the moving bough of an inedible tree, bush, or shrub, and even Molly could win him to no change of facial expression, though he ate her offered sugar.

There was a pang when I turned my back irrevocably upon my friends, having waved my hand or my panama so often that to do so again would be ridiculous. We were off, Joseph, Finois, and I; there was no getting round it; and as we ambled away along the hot white road, we seemed but small things in the scheme of a busy and indifferent world —mere cards, shuffled by the hands of an expert, for a game in which our destination was unknown.



CHAPTER IX

The Brat

"Be kind and courteous to this gentleman; hop in his walk and gambol in his eyes."

—SHAKESPEARE.

IN beginning our tramp, I trudged step for step with Joseph, who had Finois' bridle over his arm, and answered my questions regarding the various features of the landscape. Thus I was not long in discovering that he had a knowledge of the English language of which he was innocently proud. I made some enquiry concerning a fern which grew above the roadside, when we had passed through Martigny Bourg, and Joseph answered that one did not see it often in this country. "It is a seldom plant," said he. "It live in high up places, where it was *difficile* to catch, for one shall have to walk over rocks, which do not—what you say? They go down immediately, not by-and-bye."

I liked this description of a precipice, and later, when we had engaged in a desultory discussion on politics, I was delighted when Joseph spoke solemnly of the "Great Mights." He had formed opinions of Lord Beaconsfield and Gladstone, but had not yet had time to do so of Mr. Chamberlain, for, said he, "these things take a long time to think about." Fifteen or twenty years from now, he will probably be ready with an opinion on men and matters of the present. He asked gravely if there had

not been a great difference between the two long-dead Prime Ministers?

"How do you mean?" I enquired. "A difference in politics or disposition?"

"They would not like the same things," he explained. "The Lord Beaconsfield, *par exemple,* he would not have enjoyed to come such a tour like this, that will take you high in icy mountains. He would want the sunshine, and sitting still in a beautiful *chaise* with people to listen while he talked, but Monsieur Gladstone, I think he would love the mountains with the snow, as if they were his brothers."

"You are right," I said. "They were his brothers. One can fancy edelweiss growing freely on Mr. Gladstone. His nature was of the white North. You have hit it, Joseph."

"But I do not see a thing that I have hit," he replied, bewildered, glancing at the stout staff in his hand, and then at Finois, who had evidently not been brought up on blows. It was then my turn to explain; and so we tossed back and forth the conversational shuttlecock, until I found myself losing straw by straw my load of homesickness, and becoming more buoyant of spirit in the muleteer's society.

After the splendours of the Simplon it seemed to me, as the windings of the Great St. Bernard Pass shut us farther and farther away from Martigny, that this was in comparison but a peaceful valley. It was a cosey cleft among the mountains, with just room for the river to be frilled with green between its walls. There was a look of homeliness about the sloping pastures, which slept in the sunshine, lulled by the song of the swift-flowing Dranse.

The name "Great St. Bernard" had conjured up hopes of rugged grandeur, which did not seem destined to be fulfilled, and at last I confided my disappointment to Joseph. "If Monsieur will wait an all little hour, perhaps he will yet be surprised," he answered, breaking into French. "We have a long way to go, before we come to the best."

We walked briskly, lunched at the dull village of Orsières; and delaying as short a time as possible, pushed on—indeed, we pushed on much farther than Joseph had expected, when he suggested our sleeping at Bourg St. Pierre. "We might go higher," said he, "before dark, but it would be late before we could reach the Hospice, and there is no place where we could rest for the night after St. Pierre, unless Monsieur would care to stop at the Cantine de Proz."

"What is the Cantine de Proz?" I asked, trudging along the stony road, with my eyes held by a huge snow mountain which had suddenly loomed above the green shoulders of lesser hills, like a great white barrier across the world.

"The Cantine de Proz is but a house, nothing more, Monsieur, in the loneliest and wildest part of the Pass—how lonely, and how wild, you cannot guess yet by what you have seen. The people who keep the house are good folk, and they live there all the year round, even in winter, when the snow is at the second-story windows, and they must cut narrow paths, with tall white walls, before they can feed their cattle. These people sell you a cup of coffee, or a glass of beer, or of liqueur, and they have a spare room, which is very clean. If any traveller wishes to spend a night, they will make him as comfortable as they can. One English gentle-

man came, and liked the place so well, that he stayed for months, and wrote a book, I have been told. But it is desolate. Perhaps Monsieur would think it too *triste* even for a night. At St. Pierre there is at least a little life. And the hôtel 'Au Déjeuner de Napoléon,' I think it will amuse Monsieur."

"That is an odd name for a hotel," said I.

"You see, Monsieur, it was made famous because of the *déjeuner* which Napoléon took there on his march with his army of 30,000 across the Pass in the month of May, 1800, and that is the reason of the name. The madame who has the house now, is a grand-daughter of the innkeeper of that day; and she will show you the room where Napoléon breakfasted, with all the furniture just as it was then, and on the wall the portraits of her grand-parents, who waited on the great man."

"At all events, we will rest and have something to eat there," I said. "Then, if it be not too late, we might push on further. I like the idea of the lonely Cantine de Proz."

My opinion of the Pass was changing for the better, before we reached the straggling town of stony pavements, which could not have a more appropriate patron than St. Pierre. True, our road was always narrow, and poorly kept for a great mountain highway; so far, none of the magnificent engineering which impressed one on the Simplon. But here and there dazzling white peaks glistened like frozen tidal waves against the blue, and the Dranse had a particular charm of its own. Joseph said little when I patronised the Pass with a few grudging words of commendation. He had the secretive smile of a man who hides something up his sleeve.

It was five o'clock when we arrived at Bourg St. Pierre, and having climbed a dark and hilly street, closely shut in with houses which age had not made beautiful, Joseph pointed out a neat, white inn, standing at the left of the road.

"That is the 'Déjeuner de Napoléon,'" said he, "and near by are some Roman remains which will interest Monsieur if——"

"By Jove, two donkeys!" I broke in, heedless of antiquities, in my surprise at seeing two of those animals which experience had taught me to look upon as more rare than Joseph's "seldom plant." "Two donkeys in front of the inn. Where on earth can they have sprung from? I would have given a good deal for that sight a few days ago, but now"—and I glanced at the dignified Finois—"I can regard them simply with curiosity."

"I have been over this Pass more than twenty times," said Joseph (who was a native of Chamounix, I had learned), "yet rarely have I met with *ânes*. And see, Monsieur, the woman who is with them. She is not of the country, nor of that part of Italy which we enter below the Pass, at Aosta. It is a strange costume. I do not know from what valley it comes."

"Well," said I, as we drew near to the group in the road outside the hotel, "if that girl, or at any rate her hat, did not come from the Riviera somewhere, I will eat my panama."

Involuntarily I hastened my steps, and Joseph politely followed suit, dragging after him Finois, who seemed to be walking in his sleep. I felt it almost as a personal injury from the hand of Fate, that after my unavailing search for donkeys in a land where I had thought to be forced to beat them

off with sticks, I should find other persons provided with not one but two of the creatures.

They were charming little beasts, one mouse-colour, one dark-brown with large, grey-rimmed spectacles, and both animals were of the texture of uncut velvet. The former carried an excellent pack, which put mine to shame; the latter bore a boy's saddle, and the two were being fed with great bread crusts by a bewitching young woman of about twenty-six or -eight, wearing one of the toad-stool hats affected by the donkey-women of Mentone. She looked up at our approach, and having surveyed the pack and proportions of Finois with cold scorn, her interest in our procession incontestably focused upon Joseph. She tossed her head a little on one side, shot at the muleteer an arrow-gleam, half defiant, half coquettish, from a pair of big grey eyes fringed heavily with jet. She moistened full red lips, while a faint colour lit her cheeks, under the deep stain of tan and a tiger-lily powdering of freckles. Then, having seen the weary Joseph visibly rejuvenate in the brief sunshine of her glance, she turned away, and gave her whole attention to the donkeys.

"Hungry, Joseph?" I asked.

He had to bethink himself before he could answer. Then he replied that he had food in his pocket, bread and cheese, and that Finois carried his own dinner. They would be ready to go on, if I chose, or to remain, if that were my pleasure. "It is too early for a final stop, at a place where there can be no amusement for the evening," said I. "We had better go on. If you intend to stay outside with Finois, I'll send you a bottle of beer, and you can, if you will, drink my health."

With this I went in, feeling sure that the time of my absence would not pass heavily for Joseph.

This was the hour at which, in England, we would sip a cup of tea as an excuse for talk with a pretty woman in her drawing-room; but having tramped steadily for some hours in mountain air, I was in a mood to understand the tastes of that class who like an egg or a kipper for "a relish to their tea." I looked for the landlady with the illustrious ancestors, and could not find her; but voices on the floor above led me to the stairway. I mounted, passed a doorway, and found myself in a room which instinct told me had been the scene of the historic *déjeuner*.

It was a low-ceilinged room with wainscoted walls, and at first glance one received an impression of the past. There was a soft lustre of much-polished mahogany, and a glitter of old silver candelabra; I thought that I detected a faint fragrance of lavender lurking in the clean curtains, or perhaps it might have come from the square of ancient damask covering the table, on which a meal was spread.

That meal consisted of chicken; a salad of pale green lettuce and coraline tomatoes; a slim-necked bottle of white wine; a custard with a foaming crest of beaten egg and sugar; and a dish of purple figs. Food for the gods, and with only a boy to eat it—but a remarkable boy. I gazed, and did not know what to make of him. He also gazed at me, but his look lacked the curiosity with which I honoured him. It expressed frank and (in the circumstances) impudent disapproval. Having bestowed it, he nonchalantly continued his conversation with the plump and capped landlady, who was evidently enraptured

with him, while I was left to stand unnoticed on the threshold.

Purely from the point of view of the picturesque, there was some excuse for madame's preoccupation. The boy would have delighted an artist, no doubt, though our first interchange of glances gave me a strong desire to smack him.

His panama—a miniature copy of mine—hung over the back of his old-fashioned chair—the one, no doubt, in which Napoleon had sat to eat the *déjeuner*. Soft rings of dark, chestnut hair, richly bright as Japanese bronze, had been flattened across his forehead by the now discarded hat. This hair, worn too long for any self-respecting, twentieth-century boy, curled round his small head and behind the slim throat, which was like a stem for the flower of his strange little face. "Strange" was the first adjective which came into my mind; yet, if he had been a girl instead of a boy, he would have been beautiful. The delicately pencilled brows were exquisite, and out of the small brown face looked a pair of large, brilliant eyes of an extraordinary blue—the blue of the wild chicory. When the boy glanced up or down, there was great play of dark lashes, long, and amazingly thick. This would have been charming on a girl, but seemed somehow affected in a boy, though one could hardly have accused the little snipe of making his own eyelashes. He wore a very loose-trousered knickerbocker suit of navy-blue; a white silk shirt or blouse, loose also, with a turned-down Byronic collar and a careless black bow underneath. He had extremely small hands, tanned brown, and on the least finger of one was a seal ring. My impression of this youthful tourist was that in age he might be any-

where between thirteen and seventeen, and I was sure that he would be the better for a good thrashing.

"Some rich, silly mother's darling," I said to myself. "Little milksop, travelling with a muff of a tutor, I suppose. Why doesn't the ass teach him good manners?"

This lesson seemed particularly necessary, because the youth persisted in holding the attention of the landlady, who, with a comfortable back to me, laughed at some sally of the boy's. When I had stood for a moment or two, waiting for a pause which did not come, although the brat saw me and knew well what I wanted, I spoke coldly: "Pardon, madame, I desire something to eat," I said in French.

The landlady turned, surprised at the voice behind her.

"But certainly, Monsieur. Though I regret that you have come at an unfortunate time. We have not a great variety to offer you."

"Something of this sort will suit me very well," I replied, feeling hungrily that chicken, salad, custard, and figs were the things which of all others I would choose.

"It is most regrettable, Monsieur, but this young gentleman has our only chicken, unless you could wait for another to be killed, plucked, and made ready for the table."

I shuddered at the suggestion, and did not hide my repulsion. "I must put up with an omelette, then. I suppose I can have that?"

"At any other time Monsieur could have had two, if he pleased, but to-day all our eggs have gone into this custard. The young gentleman ordered

his repast by telegraph, and we did our best. As for the figs, he brought them himself; but if Monsieur would have a cutlet of the *veau,* or——"

"Give me a bottle of wine, and some bread and cheese. I do not like the *veau,*" I said, with the testiness of a hungry man disappointed. As I spoke, my eyes were on the boy, who ate his breast of chicken daintily. Pretty as he was, I should have liked to kick him.

"Little brat," I apostrophised him once more, in my mind. "If he were not a pig, he would ask me to accept half his meal. Not that I would take it. I'd be shot first, so he'd be quite safe; but he might have the decency to offer."

Worse was to come, however. I had not yet plumbed the black depths of the Brat's selfishness.

"Certainly, Monsieur; we have very good cheese," madame assured me soothingly. "If Monsieur would be pleased to step downstairs."

"I should prefer to remain here," I replied. "This is the room, is it not, where Napoleon had his *déjeuner?*"

"The same, Monsieur, in every particular. But unfortunately, it is for the moment the private sitting-room of this young gentleman, who has made me an extra price to keep it for himself."

The poor old lady suffered manifest distress in breaking this news to me, and even in my evil mood I could not add intentionally to her pain. As for its cause, however, he sat absolutely unmoved. I think, indeed, from the blue light in his great eyes (which was absolutely impish), that the situation whetted his appetite. I did not deign another glance at the little wretch, as I went out, discomfited, but I felt that he was grinning at my back.

In a room below, I had a very creditable meal, which I should have enjoyed more, had my nerves not been jarred to viciousness. In the midst, I heard footsteps running downstairs, and presently outside the door of the *salle-à-manger* the boy's voice—sweet still with childish cadences, as a boy's is before the change to manhood first breaks, then deepens it.

"If he comes in here, I shall be inclined to throw a rind of cheese at his head," I thought; but he did not heard me in my den. The voice passed away, and presently I heard another, unmistakably that of a woman, giving vent to strange profanities in softest Provençal French. The speaker was apostrophising some person or animal, who was, according to her, the most insupportable of Heaven's creatures; and at last, with calls upon martyred saints, and cries of "Fanny-anny, Fanny-anny," there mingled a scuffling and trotting which soon died away in the distance, leaving stillness.

Soon after, having finished my meal, and paid my bill, I went out to Joseph. I found him alone with Finois. The donkeys and their fair guardian had gone.

"Well," said I, as we got upon our way, "I trust you had an agreeable spell of rest? The lady in the Riviera hat looked promising. If her conversation matched her appearance, you were in luck, and well repaid for taking your refreshment out of doors."

"Monsieur," began Joseph, "have you in English a way of expressing in one word what a man feels when he is both shocked and astonished?"

"Flabbergasted might do, at a pinch," I replied, after deliberation.

"Ah, the good word, 'flabbergasta'! It says much. It is that I am flabbergasta by the young woman of the *ânes*. I was taken, I admit it, Monsieur, by her face, as was but natural. And then I wished to find out, for the satisfaction of Monsieur and myself, how so strange a cavalcade came to arrive upon the St. Bernard Pass.

"I made myself polite. I spoke with praise of the *ânes,* and though my advances were coldly received at first, at the very moment I would in discouragement have ceased my efforts, the young woman changed her front, and seemed willing to talk. She would not answer my questions, except to say that she was of Mentone, and that she had escorted the young gentleman who now employs her on several excursions, a year ago, when he was on the Riviera. That he had sent for her and the two *ânes* to join him by rail, though the expense was great, and that they were travelling for the young gentleman's amusement, and his health, as he had had an illness which has left him still thin, and a little weak. From what place he had come, or to what place they were bound, she would not say. Her own name she told me, when I had asked twice over, but the young gentleman's name she would not give, nor would she even say the country of his birth. It was when I brought up this subject that the—the——"

"The flabbergasting began?"

"Precisely, Monsieur. She abused me for my curiosity, and, oh, Monsieur, the words she used! The profanities! And at the same time her face as mild as a pigeon's! She taunted me with being a Protestant, as if it were a black crime which bred others. Her name, if you would believe it, is Innocentina Palumbo—*Innocentina!* But her tongue!

Monsieur, I listened as if I had been turned to stone. And it was at this time that the young gentleman, of whom she had told me, came out of the inn. He wished to walk, but Innocentina said that he was already too tired, and before he knew what was happening, she had him in the saddle on his *âne*. So they went off, and where they will pass the night, their saints alone know, for it is all but certain that they will never get such animals as those even as far as the Cantine de Proz."

"They were going in our direction, then?" I said. "We shall pass them on the way presently."

"I do not doubt it, Monsieur, though they had half an hour's start."

"Were the boy and the donkey-woman alone? No tutor with them?"

"Tutor, Monsieur? The poor young gentleman has a tutor and a duenna in Innocentina. I wish him joy of her."

"I wish her joy of him," said I, remembering my wrongs. But soon I forgot them and all other troubles past and present, in surrendering my spirit to the glory of the scene. Joseph had his triumph, for the surprise he had kept up his sleeve was out at last. St. Bernard had me at his feet, and held me there. The wild and gloomy splendour of the Pass struck at my heart, and fired my imagination. Even the Simplon had nothing like this to give. The Simplon at its finest sang a pæan to civilisation; it glorified the science of engineering, and told you that it was a triumph of modernity. But this strange, unkempt Pass, with its inadequate road,—now overhanging a sheer precipice, now dipping down steeply towards the wild bed of its sombre river,—this Great St. Bernard, seemed a secret way

back into other centuries, savage and remote. I felt shame that I had patronised it earlier, with condescending admiration of some prettinesses. No wonder that Joseph had smiled and held his peace, knowing what was to come. There was the old road, the Roman road, along which Napoleon had led his staggering thousands. There were his forts, scarcely yet crumbled into ruin. I saw the army, a straggling procession of haggard ghosts, following always, and falling as they followed, enacting again for me the passing scene of death and anguish. I was one of the men. I struggled on, because Napoleon needed all his soldiers. Then weakness crushed me, like a weight of iron. A mist before my eyes shut out the opposite precipice with its sparse pines, and flashing waterfalls, the mountain heights beyond, and the merciless blue sky. This was death. Who cared? The echo of thirty thousand feet was in my ears as they passed on, leaving me to die by the roadside, as I had left others before.

I started, and waked from my dream. It was a joyful shock to see Joseph beside me, in the homely clothes which had replaced his "Sunday best"; to see Finois and his pack full of my friendly belongings. But I clung to the comfortable present for a few moments only. The spell of dead centuries had me in its grip. Farther and farther back into the land of dead days, I journeyed with St. Bernard, and helped him found the monastery which the eyes of my flesh had not yet seen. The eyes of my spirit saw the place, the nerves of my spirit felt the chill of its remoteness. And even when I waked again, I could not be sure that I was Montagu Lane, an idle young man of the twentieth century, who had come for the gratification of a whim to

this fastness where greater men had ventured in peril and self-sacrifice.

Imagination is the one possession having which no man can be poor, or mean, or insignificant. He can walk with kings, and he can see the high places of the world with seeing eyes, a gift which no money can give; and yet he will have to suffer as those without imagination never can suffer or picture others suffering.

I told myself this, somewhat grandiloquently, and with self-gratulation, as I rubbed shoulders with certain of the world's heroes who had passed along this way; and there was physical relief after a strain, when the precipitous valley widened into billowy pastures lying green at the rugged feet of mountains.

Can any sound be more soothing than the tinkle of cow-bells in a mountain pass, as twilight falls softly, like the wings of a brooding bird? It is to the ear what a cool draught of spring water is to thirsty lips. There are verses of poetry in it, only to be reset and rearranged, like pearls fallen from their string; there is a perfume of primroses in it; there is the colour of early dawn, or of fading sunset, when a young moon is rising, curved and white as a baby's arm; there is also the same voice that speaks from the brook or the river running over rocks.

Suddenly we were in the midst of a great herd of cows, which blew out volumes of clover breath upon us, in mild surprise at our existence. They rubbed against us, or ambled away, lowing to each other, and I was surprised to find that, instead of each neck being provided with a bell, as I had fancied from the multitudinous tinklings, one cow only was thus ornamented.

"How was the selection made?" I asked Joseph. "Did they choose the most popular cow, a sort of stable-yard belle, voted by her companions a fit leader of her set; or was the choice guided by chance?" Joseph could not tell me, and I suppose that I shall never know.

The big, lumbering forms crowded so closely round us in the twilight shadows, that now and then, to force a passage, Joseph was obliged to pull a slowly whisking tail, resembling almost exactly an old-fashioned bell-rope. Presently we had made our way past the herd, which was shut from our sight by the curtain of evening, though up on the mountain-tops it was still golden day.

"There," said Joseph, pointing, "is the Cantine de Proz."

CHAPTER X

The Scraping of Acquaintance

"You shall be treated to . . . ironical smiles and mockings."
—Walt Whitman.

"Up the hillside yonder, through the morning."
—Robert Browning.

I saw, standing desolate in the basin of mountains, an old house of grey stone, very square, very plain, very resolute and staunch of physiognomy. The windows were still unlighted, and it looked a gloomy home for months of winter cold and snow. Suddenly, as we approached, rather wearily now, a yellow gleam flashed out in an upper window.

"That is the spare room for strangers," said Joseph, and I thought that there was a note of anxiety in his voice.

"Perhaps someone has arrived before us," I remarked. "I hadn't thought of that, as you said so few people ever stopped at the Cantine over night."

"Had you noticed, Monsieur, that after all we never passed the party with the donkeys?" asked my muleteer.

"I had forgotten them."

"I had not, but it was Monsieur's pleasure to go slowly; to stop for the views, to look at the ruined forts, and to trace the old road. We gave them time to get far ahead. I was always watching, but never saw them. The *ânes* had more endurance

than I thought, and as for that Innocentina, she is a daughter of Satan; she would know no fatigue."

"It would be like that little brat to gobble up the one spare room of the Cantine as he did the one chicken of the 'Déjeûner,'" I muttered. "But we shall see what we shall see."

We went on more rapidly, and soon arrived at the bottom of a steep flight of stone steps which led up to the door of the Cantine. A man came forward to greet us—a fine fellow, with the frank and lofty bearing of one whose life is passed in high altitudes.

"Can we have supper and accommodation for the night at your house?" I asked.

"Supper, most certainly, and with pleasure," came the courteous answer, "though we have only plain fare to offer. But the one spare room we have for our occasional guests, has just been taken by a young English or American gentleman. The woman who drives the two donkeys with which they travel, will have a bed in the room of my sister, and we could find sleeping place of a sort for your muleteer; but I fear we have no way of making Monsieur comfortable."

I was filled with rage against the wretch who had robbed me of a decent meal, and would now filch from me a night's rest.

"We have walked a long way," I said, "and are tired. We might have stopped at St. Pierre, but preferred to come on to you. It is now too dark to go back, or go on. Surely there are two beds in your spare room, and as you keep an inn, and pretend to give bed and board to travellers, you are bound to arrange for my accommodation."

"The young monsieur pays for the two beds in

the spare room, in order to secure the whole for himself alone," replied the landlord. "Not expecting any other guests, we agreed to this; but the youth is perhaps a countryman of yours, and rather than you should go further, or spend a night of discomfort, he will probably consent to let you share the room."

"He shall consent, or I will know the reason why," I said to myself fiercely; but aloud I merely answered that I would be glad of a few minutes' conversation with the young gentleman.

My host led me to the house door, introduced me to a handsome sister, who was my hostess, explained to her the situation, with the view of it we had arrived at, and descended to show Joseph where to shelter Finois.

My landlady said that she would put the case to the occupant of the spare room, who was already in his new quarters, preparing for supper, but I persuaded her that it would be well for me to be on the spot, and add my arguments to hers. We went upstairs, and in a dark passage plunged suddenly into a pool of yellow light, gushing from a half-open door. I hurried forward, step for step with my guide, lest the door should be shut in my face before I could reach it. Over my hostess' shoulder, I saw a bare but neat interior; a "coffin" bed, a white-washed wall, and an uncarpeted floor, Mademoiselle Innocentina Palumbo sitting upon it, tailor-fashion, engaged in excavating a large, dark object from a *rücksack*. In front of her stood the Brat, deeply interested in the operation, his curly head bent, his childish little hands on his hips.

He was talking and laughing gaily; but at the sound of footsteps in the passage he glanced up,

and, seeing me, stared in haughty surprise, which tipped the scales towards anger.

"Here is a monsieur who is belated on the Pass, and begs" (this was hardly the way in which I would have put it) "that he may be allowed to share your room," explained our landlady.

"*Share my room!*" repeated the Brat, so dumfounded at the simple statement that he spoke in English. Now I knew that he was a countryman, not of mine, but of Molly's, and I wished that she were here to deal with him. "I have never heard anything so—so ridiculous."

"Really," said I, assuming an air I had found successful with freshers in good old days of undergrad-dom (Molly called it my "belted hearl" manner), "really, I fail to see anything ridiculous in the proposal. This is an inn, which professes to accommodate travellers. I have a right to insist upon a bed."

To my intense irritation Innocentina giggled. The Brat did not laugh, but he grew rosy, like a girl. Even his little ears turned pink, under his absurd mop of chestnut curls. "You have no right to insist upon mine," retorted he, in the honey-sweet contralto which tried in vain to make of a pert imp, an angel.

"You cannot sleep in two," said I.

"That is my affair, since I have agreed to pay for them."

"I contend that you cannot pay for both, since one is legally mine, by the laws protecting travellers," I argued truculently, hoping to frighten the rude child, though I should have been sore put to it to prove my point.

"I have always heard that possession is nine

points of the law," said he, impudent and apparently unintimidated. "This is my room, every hole and corner of it, and if you try to intrude, I shall simply sit up and yell all night, and throw things, so that you will not get an instant's sleep. I swear it."

Then I lost my temper. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," I exclaimed. "I wonder where you were brought up?"

"Where big boys never bully little ones."

"Of all the selfish, impertinent brats!" I could not help muttering.

"If I'm a brat, you're a brute, sir. You have only to glance at the dictionary to see which is worse."

He looked so impish, defying me, like a miniature Ajax, that with all the will in the world to box his ears, I burst out laughing.

Checking my mirth as soon as I could, however, I covered its inappropriateness with a steely frown. "I do not need to glance at the dictionary to see that you would be a detestable room-mate," said I, "and on second thoughts I prefer to sleep quietly in the stable rather than press my claim here." With this, I turned on my heel, not giving the enemy time for another volley, and stalked downstairs, followed, I regret to say, by Innocentina's ribald laughter.

Almost immediately I was rejoined by the handsome landlady, who, profuse in her regrets, though she had understood no word of what had passed, attempted to console me with the promise of a bed in the *salle-à-manger*. Meanwhile, if I desired to wash, her brother would superintend my ablutions.

Over those rites (which were duly performed at a pump, while the little wretch upstairs wallowed in the luxury of a basin almost as large as my hat),

I draw a veil. By the time that they were finished, and I was shining with yellow kitchen soap, having been unable to make use of my own in the circumstances, supper was ready. I walked sulkily into the room, which later would be transformed into my bedchamber, and to my annoyance saw the Brat already seated at the table. I had fancied that his conscience would counsel supping privately in the room he had usurped, but this imp seemed to have been born without a sense of shame. Thanks to him, I had not even been able to give myself a clean collar, as it had not been possible to open the mule-pack and improvise a dressing-room in the neighbourhood of the pump. But he—he, the usurper, he, the guilty one—had changed from his low-necked shirt and blue serge jacket and knickers into a kind of evening costume, original, I should say, to himself, or copied from some stage child, or Christmas Annual.

He did not speak to me, nor I to him, though, as I sat down in the chair placed for me at the opposite end of the table, I caught a sapphire gleam from the brilliant eyes, which burned so vividly in the little brown face.

There came an omelette. It was passed to me. Maliciously, I selected the best bit from the middle. The boy took what was left. Veal followed, in the form of cutlets, two in number. A glance showed me that one was mostly composed of bone and gristle. I helped myself to the other. Revenge was mine at last, though to enjoy it fully I must have a peep at the enemy, to make sure that he felt and understood his righteous punishment.

But life is crowded with disappointments. The foe was looking incredibly small, and young, and

meek, a puny thing for a man to wreak his vengeance on. With long lashes cast down, making a deep shadow on his thin cheeks, he sat wrestling with his portion, from which the cleverest manipulation of knife and fork was powerless to extract an inch of nourishment. As he gave up the struggle at last, with unmoved countenance, and not even a sigh of complaint, my heart failed me. I felt that I had snatched bread from the mouth of starving infanthood. Had not Joseph learned from Innocentina that the boy had lately recovered from a severe illness? Unspeakable brat that he was, and small favour that he deserved at my hands, I resolved that he should have the best of the next dish when it came round.

This good intention, however, went to supply another stone in that place which seems ever in need of repaving. Cheese succeeded the veal, a well-meaning but somewhat overpowering cheese, and neither the Brat nor I encouraged it. It was borne away, intact, and after a short delay appeared a dish of plums, with another of small and attractive cakes, evidently imported from a town.

I saw the boy's eye brighten as it fell upon the cakes. He glanced from them to me, as I was offered my choice, and said hastily: "There is one cake there which I want very much. I suppose if I tell you which it is, you will eat it."

"There is also only one which I care for," said I. "I wonder if it's the same?"

"Probably," said the boy. "If you take it, there isn't another which I would be found dead with in my mouth, on a desert island. And I haven't had much dinner."

"*I* had to wash under the pump," said I. "Still,

greatness lies in magnanimity. You shall choose your cake first; but remember, you cannot have it, and eat it, too; so make up your mind quickly which is better."

"I always thought that a stupid saying," remarked the Brat, as he helped himself to a gingernut with pink icing. "I have my cake, and when I have eaten it, I take another."

"Your experience in life has been fortunate," I replied, contenting myself with the second-best cake. "But it has not been long. When you are a man——"

"A man! I would rather die—young than grow up to be one."

"Indeed?" I exclaimed, surprised at this outburst.

"I hate men."

"Ah, perhaps then, your experience has not been as fortunate in men as in cakes."

"No, it hasn't. It has been just the opposite."

"One would say, 'Thereby hangs a tale.'"

"There does. But it is not for strangers."

"I'm not a lover of after-dinner stories. Here comes the coffee. Luckily, there's plenty for us both. Will you have a cigarette?"

"No, thanks."

"A cigar, then?"

"I don't smoke."

"Ah, some boys' heads *won't* stand it. I'm ashamed to say that I smoked at fourteen. But perhaps you're not yet——"

"I will change my mind and have a cigarette, since you are so obliging."

"Sure you won't regret it?"

"Quite sure, thank you."

"They're rather strong."

"I'm not afraid."

He took a cigarette from my case, and smoked it daintily. Whether it were my imagination, or whether a slight pallor did really become visible under the sun-tan on the velvet-smooth face, I am not certain; but at all events he rose when nothing was left between his fingers save an ash clinging to a bit of gold paper, and excused himself with belated politeness.

Not long after, my bed was made up on the floor, and I slept as I fancy few kings sleep.

Strange; not then, or ever, did I dream of Helen.

The voice of Finois or some near relative of his roused me at dawn. I remembered where I was, whither bound, and sleep instantly seemed irrelevant. I scrambled up from my lonely couch, went to the open window, which was a square of grey-green light, and looked out at the mountain walls of the valley basin.

The day was not awake yet, but only half conscious that it must awake. There was the faint thrill of mystery which comes with earliest dawn, as though it were for you alone of all the world, and no one else could find his way down its dim labyrinths. But even as I looked, there came a movement near the house, and I saw the stalwart figure of the landlord shape itself from the shadows. Other forms were stirring too, the stolid forms of cows, and those of two sturdy little ponies, which were being turned into a pasture.

It occurred to me that I could not do better than get through my toilet, and, if Joseph and Finois were of the same mind, make an early start. I thought

that if I could reach the Hospice before all the gold of sunrise had boiled over night's brim, I should have a picture to frame in memory.

At bedtime they had given me a wooden tub such as laundresses use, and filled it for my morning bath. I had my own soap, and a great, clean, coarse dish-towel of crash or some such material. Never before was there a bath like it, with the good smell of pine-wood of which the tub was made, and the tingle of the water from a mountain spring. I revelled in it, and as I dressed could have sung for pure joy of life, until I remembered that I was a jilted man, and this tour a voyage of consolation.

"You are miserable, you know," I informed my reflection in a small, strange-coloured glass, which allowed me to shave my face in greenish sections. "It is a kind of madness, this spurious gaiety of yours."

In half an hour I was out of the house, and found Joseph feeding Finois. They were both prepared to leave at ten minutes' notice, and when the two human creatures of the party had been refreshed with crusty bread and steaming coffee, the procession of three set forth. As for the boy, the donkeys, and their guardian, as far as I knew they were still sleeping the sleep of the unjust.

If the Pass had been glorious in open day, and by falling twilight, it was doubly wonderful in this mystic dawn-time before the lamp of the rising sun had lit the valley. The green alps where the cattle pastured were faintly musical, far and near, with the ringing of unseen bells, and the air was vibrant with the rush and whisper of waters. As the shadows melted in the crucible of dawn, and an opaline light trembled on the dark mountain-tops that towered

round us, I saw marvels which either had not existed last night, or I had been dull clod enough to miss them.

Fairy wild-flowers such as I had never seen studded the rocks with jewels of blue and gold, and rose, and little silver stars; and there were some wonderful, shining things of creamy grey plush, suggesting glorified thistles.

We walked through the Valley of Death, where many of Napoleon's men had perished; and the first rays of sunrise touched the tragic rocks with the gold of hope. Up, up beyond the alps and the sparse pine-trees we climbed, until we came to the snowline, and passed beyond the first white ledge, carved in marble by the cold hand of a departed winter. Down through a gap in the mountains streamed an icy blast, and I had to remind myself, shivering, that this was August, not December. The wind tore apart the fabric of lacy cloud which had been looped in folds across the rock-face, like a veil hiding the worn features of some aged nun, and showed jagged mountain peaks, towering against a sky of mother-o'-pearl. Suddenly, after a steep ascent, we saw before us a tall, lonely mass of grey stone, built upon the rock. Behind it the sun had risen, and fired to burnished gold the still lake which mirrored the Hospice and its dark wall of mountains, seamed with snow.

The impression of high purity, of peace won through privation, and of nearness to Heaven itself, was so strong upon me, that I seemed to hear a voice speaking a benediction.

CHAPTER XI

A Shadow of Night

"This villain. . . . He dares—I know not half he dares—
But remove him—quick!"
—Robert Browning.

So early was it still, I feared we had come before the brotherhood were astir to receive visitors; but as I looked up at the great, grey, silent building, the noble head of a magnificent St. Bernard dog appeared in the doorway, at the top of steep stone steps. There could not have been a more appropriate welcome to this remote dwelling of a devoted band; and when the dog, after gazing gravely at the newcomers, vanished into darkness, I knew that he had gone in to tell of our arrival. I was right, too, for once within, he uttered a deep bell-note, more sonorous and more musical than lies in the throats of common dogs, and was answered by a distant baying. One could not say that these majestic animals "barked." There was as indisputable a difference between an ordinary bark, and the sound they made, as between the barrel instrument played in the streets, and a grand cathedral organ.

Joseph had visited the Hospice many times, and knew the etiquette for strangers. He bade me go in, and ring the bell at the *grille*, unless I should meet one of the monks before reaching it. I mounted the

steps, entered the wide doorway which had framed the dog's head, and found myself in a vast, dusky corridor, resonant with strange echoings, and mysterious with flitting shadows, which might be ghosts of the past, or live beings of the present. As my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I saw that there were numerous persons in this great hall: tall monks in flowing robes of black, beggars come to solicit alms or breakfast; and dogs, many dogs, who crowded round me, with a waving of huge tails, and a gleaming of brown jewelled eyes in the dusk. I did not need to ring the bell of the iron gate beyond which, according to Joseph, no woman has ever passed. One of the monks came to me—a tall, spare young man with a grave face, soft in expression, yet hardened in outline by a rigorous life and exposure to extreme cold. He gave me welcome in French, with here and there an interpellation of "Down, Turk," "Be quiet, Jupiter!" Would I like breakfast, he asked; and then—yes, certainly—to see the chapel, the *bibliothèque,* the monastery museum, and the Alpine garden? There would be plenty of time for this, and still to reach Aosta. Another monk was called, and an introduction effected. I was taken into a handsomely decorated refectory, where I opened my eyes in some astonishment at sight of the Imp, drinking coffee from a shallow bowl nearly as big as his childish head. Innocentina was no doubt at this moment shocking Joseph by some new depravity, in the *salle-à-manger* where humbler folk were entertained with the same hospitality as their (so called) betters.

The Brat set down his bowl, and saw me, as I subsided into a chair on the opposite side of the long, narrow table. His face flushed, and the brilliant

blue eyes clouded, but he deigned to acknowledge our acquaintance with a slight bow.

"I didn't suppose you would have started yet," said I.

"I thought the same thing about you," he retorted. "We got off very quietly from the Cantine——"

"Ah, you wished to steal a march on me," I broke in. "But really, my young friend, you need not have feared that I should impose myself upon you as a travelling companion. My one object in making this excursion is, if not to enjoy my own society, at any rate to experiment with it, therefore——"

"I have *two* objects in making mine," the boy interrupted. "One is to avoid men; the other is to find materials for writing a book, with no men in it —only places."

"It will not be owing to me, if you fail in the former," said I. "As for the latter, naturally it will depend upon yourself. What shall you call it—'A Chiel takkin' Notes' or 'In Search of the Grail'?"

He blushed vividly. "I haven't decided on the name yet, but it can't matter to you, as I do not expect you to buy the book when it comes out; nor need you be afraid that you will figure in the pages. If I were to call my book 'In Search of—anything,' it would be, 'In Search of Peace.'"

With this, the strange child rose from the table, and bowing, departed, leaving me lost in wonder at him. He was but an infant, and an impertinent infant at that; yet suddenly I had had a glimpse, through the great sea-blue eyes, of a soul, weary after some tragic experience. At least this was the impression which flashed into my mind, with the one look I surprised before lashes hid its secret; but in a

moment I was laughing at myself. Ridiculous to have such a thought in connection with a slip of a boy, seventeen at most! I lingered over my breakfast, so that the Brat might have finished his sightseeing and got away, before my tour of the Hospice began.

He and I had had the table to ourselves at first, but I sat so long that others came in, evidently persons who had spent the night at the monastery. There was a Russian family, of so many daughters that I wondered their parents had found names for them all; a couple of German women in plaid blouses so terrible that they set me speculating. Had the material been chosen by their husbands, with the view of alienating all masculine admiration, as a Japanese girl, when married, blackens her teeth? Or had the ladies inflicted the frightful things upon themselves, by way of penance for some grievous sin? I should have liked to ask, especially as one of the wearers was very pretty, with a large, madonna loveliness. But under my dreaming eyes, she began eating honey with her knife, and I sprang from the table hastily. As I paused, I heard two stolid Cockneys asking each other why the—dickens they had come to this "beastly, cold, God-forsaken hole, with nothing but a lot of ugly mountains to see. There was better sport in Oxford Street." I should not have considered it murder if I had killed them where they sat, but I refrained, rather than soil my hands. And after all, if a primrose on a river's brim, but a yellow primrose was to them, what did it matter to me?

I visited the *bibliothèque,* which was haunted by a fragrance intoxicating to booklovers, of dead centuries, leather bindings, and parchment. I saw the

piano given by the King when he was Prince of Wales; the fine collection of coins and early Roman remains found in the neighbourhood of the monastery; I dropped a louis into the box of offerings in the chapel, and then was taken by a mild-eyed, frail-looking monk to see some of the rooms allotted to guests at the Hospice. Seeing them, I was inclined to wish that I had pushed on through the darkness last night, and reached this mountain-top to sleep. I liked the wainscoted walls, the white, canopied beds, but most of all, I liked the deep-set windows with their view of the silent lake, asleep in the bosom of the mountains, and dreaming of the sky. On most of the walls were votive offerings in the shape of pictures, sent to the monks by grateful visitors in far-off countries. One was an engraving which had adorned the nursery in my youth, and had been a never-failing source of curiosity to me. It was Gustave Doré's "Christian Martyrs," and I had once been deprived of pudding at the nursery dinner, because I had remarked (with irreverence wholly unintentional) that one of the lions seemed ill, and anxious to "climb up the wall and get away from the nasty martyrs." Thus it is that children are misunderstood by their elders! and now, as I gazed at the same picture on the monastery wall, I felt again all the old, impotent rebellion against injustice and misplaced power.

Later, I wandered through the pathetically interesting Alpine garden, carefully kept by the monks; and then, sure that by this time the Brat and his cavalcade must be far on their way, I started, with Joseph and Finois, to stroll down the Pass towards Aosta.

I had promised Jack and Molly to tell them in my

letters, whether it would be possible for them, with a motor, to go by some of the routes which I chose. Over the St. Bernard from Martigny to the Hospice they could not have ventured, even in the stealthy, fly-by-night manner in which they had "done" the St. Gothard and the Simplon; for on the St. Bernard the road was always narrow, often stony and dangerous. Beyond, on the other side, even carriages cannot yet pass, descending to Aosta, though in another year the new road will be finished. As it is, for many a generation pilgrims from the Hospice to Italy have been obliged to go down as far as the mountain village of St. Rhémy either on foot or mule-back; thus there was no hope for Mercédès there.

I went swinging down the steep and winding path, my heart chanting a psalm to the mountains. Mountains like cathedrals, with carved, graceful spires; mountains like frozen waves left by some great sea when the world was chaos; mountains like leaning towers of Pisa; mountains like sentinel Titans; mountains silver-grey; mountains dark-red. The "Pain de Sucre" was strangest of all in form, perhaps, and Joseph distressed me much by remarking guilelessly that it, and other white shapes at which he pointed, looked exactly like frosted wedding-cakes. It was true; they did; but they looked like nobler things also, and I resented having so cheap a simile put into my head.

With every step the way grew more glorious. This was an enchanted land. I could hardly believe that thousands of travellers had seen it before, and would again. I felt as if I had fallen Sindbad-like, into a valley undiscovered by man; and, like Sindbad's valley, this sparkled to my dazzled eyes with

countless gems. Not all cold, white diamonds, like his, but gems of every colour. The rocks through which our path was cut, glowed with rainbow hues, like different precious metals blended. This effect struck me at first (in the brilliant sunshine which alone kept me from being nipped with cold) as puzzling, but in a moment I had solved the "jewel mystery" of the mountains. The rocks were of porphyry, and marble, and granite, spangled with mica; and over all spread in patches a lichen of rose, and green, and yellow, like chipped rubies and emeralds among gold-filings.

So wild and splendid was the scene, composed and painted by a peerless Master, that I slackened my pace, reluctant to leave so much splendour behind; but despite all delaying, we came after a time down to tree-level. The landscape changed; the diamond spray of miniature cataracts dashed over high cliffs, among balsamic pine forests; the sunshine brought out the intense green of moss and fern. We met porters struggling up the height with luggage on their backs, and fat women riding depressed mules. It was very mediæval, and I had the sensation of having walked into a picture—round the corner of it, into the best part which you know must be there, though it can't be seen by outsiders.

It took us an hour and a half to walk the eleven kilometres down to St. Rhémy, where we lunched well, and drank a sparkling wine of the country which may have been meretricious, but tasted good. There was a *douane,* for we had now passed out of Switzerland into Italy, and my mule-pack was examined with curiosity; but why I should have been questioned with insistence as to whether I were concealing sausages, I could not guess, unless a

swashbuckling German princeling who married into our family eight generations ago, was using my eyes for windows at the time.

I need not have feared that the best of the journey would be over at St. Rhémy, for the road (which broadened there, and became "navigable" for motor cars as well as horse-drawn vehicles), wound down still among stupendous mountains capped with snow, jagged peaks of dark granite, and purple porphyry which glowed crimson in contrast with the dazzling snow.

We did not leave St. Rhémy till long past one, and as we descended upon lower levels the sun grew hot. More than once I called a halt, and we had a delicious rest under a tree in some exquisite glade a little removed from the roadside. It was during one of these, while Finois cropped an indigestible branch, that Joseph opened his heart, and told me his life's history. It had been more or less adventurous, and it had held a tragedy, for Joseph had loved, and the fair had jilted him on the eve of their marriage, for a prosperous baker. This fellow-feeling (for had we not both been thrown over for tradesmen?) made me wondrous kind towards Joseph; and when I had drawn from him the fact that his great ambition was to own three donkeys, and start in business for himself. I secretly determined to see what could be done towards forwarding this end.

We did not hurry, and while we were still far above Aosta, the shadows lengthened and thinned, like children who have grown too fast. We exchanged chestnuts for pines, and the pure ethereal blue of Italy burned in the sky. Everywhere was rich abundance of colour. The green of trees and grass was luscious; even the shadows were of a trans-

lucent purple. Below us the valley of Aosta lay, so dreamily lovely, so peaceful, that one could imagine there only happiness and prosperity.

I remarked this to Joseph, and he smiled his melancholy smile. "It is beautiful," he said, "and when you are down at the bottom, you will not be disappointed in the country. But for happiness? It is no better than elsewhere. Wait till you see the *crétins;* there is a *crétin* in almost every family. And not long ago there was a dreadful murder in the neighbourhood of Aosta. The criminal has not yet been caught. He is supposed to be hiding somewhere in the mountains, and the police cannot find him. There is a printed notice out, warning people to beware of the murderer—so I read in a newspaper not long ago; and I have heard that the inhabitants of all these little hamlets we see here and there, dare not go from village to village after dark, for fear of being attacked."

"Then, if we should happen to be belated, we might have an adventure?" I said.

"Indeed, it is not at all unlikely, Monsieur. No doubt the man is desperate, and if he saw a chance to get a change of clothing, a mule, and some money, he might risk attacking even two travellers, from behind. But we shall arrive at Aosta before dark, and I am afraid——"

"I'll warrant you're not afraid of danger."

"That we shall get no such sport, Monsieur."

Even as he spoke there came, with the wind blowing up from the valley, a loud, long-drawn shriek of fear or distress, uttered by a woman. We looked at each other, Joseph and I, and then without a word set off running down the hill, in the direction of the cry. Again it came, "À moi—à moi!" We could

hear the words, now, and then a wild, inarticulate scream.

I bounded down the winding white road, where the evening shadows lay, and Joseph followed, somehow dragging Finois—at least, I am sure that he would not have left his beloved beast behind,—and so at last we turned a sharp bend of the path, thickly fringed with a dense wood, where suddenly Innocentina sprang almost into my arms. She ran to me, blindly, not seeing who it was, but knowing by instinct that help was at hand. "A robber—a murderer!" she panted. "Oh, save——" and then, I think, she fainted.

I have a vague recollection of tossing her to Joseph, and plunging into the dim wood, where something moved, half-hidden by the crowding trees. It was the donkeys I saw at first, and then I came full upon a man, dressed all in the brown of the tree trunks, so that at a distance he would not be seen among them, in the dusk. He had the *rücksack* I had noticed at the Cantine de Proz in one hand, and with the other he had just drawn a knife from the belt under his coat. On the ground crouched the Boy, shielding his bowed face with a slim, blue-serge arm.

CHAPTER XII

The Princess

"My little body is aweary of this great world."
—SHAKESPEARE.

THIS was the tableau photographed on my retina as I sprang forward; but I drew the revolver which had occasioned Winston's mirth when Molly gave it to me at Brig, and in an instant the picture had dissolved. The man in brown dropped the *rücksack*, and ran as I have never seen man run before—ran as if he wore seven-leagued boots. My revolver was not loaded, and all the cartridges were among my shirts and collars, on Finois' back, therefore I could pursue him with nothing more dangerous than anathemas, unless I had deserted the boy, who seemed at first glance to be almost as near fainting as Innocentina.

Reluctantly letting the man go free, I bent over the little figure in blue, still on its knees. "Are you hurt?" I asked in real anxiety, such as I had not thought it possible to feel for the Brat.

"No—only my arm. He wrung it so. And perhaps I have twisted my knee. I don't know yet. He pushed me back, and I fell down."

I lifted him up and supported him for a moment, he leaning against me, the colour drained from cheeks and lips. But suddenly it streamed back, even to his forehead; and raising his head from my

shoulder where it had lain for a few seconds, he unwound himself gently from my arm. "I'm all right now, thank you awfully," he said. "I believe you have saved my life and Innocentina's. You see, we fought with the man for our things; and when he saw that he couldn't steal them without a struggle, he whipped out a knife and—and then you came. Oh, he was a coward to attack two—two people so much weaker than himself, and then to run away when a stronger one came!"

I kept Joseph's story to myself, and hoped that the boy had not heard it. Perhaps, after all, this lurking beast of prey had not been the murderer in hiding. The place was desolate, and evening was falling. Some tramp, or thievish peasant, taking advantage of the murder-scare, might easily have dared this attack; and when I glanced at the picnic array under a tree near by, I was even less surprised than before at the thing which had happened.

The mouse-coloured pack-donkey had been denuded of his load, and the most elaborate tea basket I had ever seen (finer even than Molly's) was open on the ground. If the cups, plates and saucers, the knives, spoons and forks, were not silver, they were masquerading hypocrites; and I now discovered that the large, dark object which I had seen Innocentina putting into the *rücksack* (at this moment half on, half off) was a very handsome travelling bag. It was gaping wide, the mouth fixed in position with patent catches, and it lay where the disappointed thief had flung it, tumbled on its side, with a quantity of gold and crystal fittings scattered round about. On the gold backs of the brushes, and the tops of the bottles, was an intricate monogram, traced in small turquoises.

"By Jove!" I exclaimed. "Do you travel with these things? What madness to spread them out in the woods by an unfrequented mountain road! That is to offer too much temptation even to the honest poor."

"I know," said the boy meekly. "It was stupid to picnic in such a place, but we had come fast" (with this he had the grace to look a little shamefaced, knowing that I knew *why* he had come fast) "and we were tired. It was so beautiful here, and seemed so peaceful that we never thought of danger, at this time of day. We had just begun to pack up our things to move on again, when there was a rustling behind us, the crackling of a branch under a foot, and that wretch sprang out. I was frightened, but—I hate being a coward, and I just made up my mind he *shouldn't* have our things. Innocentina screamed, and I struck at the man with the stick she uses to drive Fanny and Souris. Then he got out his knife, and Innocentina screamed a good deal more, and—I don't quite know what did happen after that, till you came."

"Well, I'm thankful I was near," I said. "And I must say that, though it was foolhardy to make such a display of valuables, you were a plucky little David to defend your belongings against such a Goliath. I admire you for it."

The boy flushed with pleasure. "Oh, do you really think I was plucky?" he asked. "Everything was so confused, I wasn't sure. I'd rather be plucky than anything. Thank you for saying that, almost as much as for saving our lives. And—and I'm dreadfully sorry I called you a—brute, last night."

"It was only because I called you a brat. I fully deserved it, and we'll cry quits, if you don't mind.

Now, I'd better see how the fainting lady is, and then I'll help you get your things together. How are the knee and arm?"

"Nothing much wrong with them after all, I think," said the boy, limping a little as he walked by my side back to the road, where I had left Innocentina with Joseph.

We had taken but a few steps, when they both appeared, the young woman white under her tan, her eyes big and frightened. She was herself again, very thankful for so good an end to the adventure, and volubly ashamed of the weakness to which she had given way. In the midst of her explanations and enquiries, however, I noticed that she took time now and then to throw a glance at my muleteer, not scornful and defiant, as on the day before, but grateful and mildly feminine. In conclave we agreed to say nothing in Aosta of the grim encounter, lest our lives should be made miserable by *gendarmes* and much red tape. But Joseph, less diplomatic than I, had not scrupled to seize the moment of Innocentina's recovery to pour into her ears the story of the escaped criminal, and the excitement in which he had plunged the neighbouring country. She was anxious to hurry on as quickly as possible, lest night should overtake her party on the way, and, still pale and tremulous, she sprang eagerly to the work of gathering up the scattered belongings. While she and Joseph put the tea-basket to rights, the boy and I rearranged the gorgeous fittings of the bag, and discovered that not even a single bottle-top was missing.

"What a burden to carry on a donkey's back!" I laughed. "You are a regular Beau Brummel."

"Why not?" pleaded the boy. "I like pretty things, and this is very convenient. It is no trouble for Souris. When the bag is in the *rücksack,* no one would suspect that it is valuable. I have carried all this luggage so, ever since Lucerne, and never had any bother before."

"What, you too started from Lucerne?"

"Yes. I had Innocentina and the donkeys come up from the Riviera, to meet me there. We have been a long time on the way—weeks: for we have stopped wherever we liked, and as long as we liked. Until to-day we haven't had a single real adventure. I was wishing for one, but now—well, I suppose most adventures are disagreeable when they are happening, and only turn nice afterwards, in memory."

"Like caterpillars when they become butterflies. But look here, my young friend David, lest you meet another Goliath, I really think you'd better put up with the proximity (I don't say society) of that hateful animal, Man, as far as Aosta. Joseph and I will either keep a few yards in advance, or a few yards in the rear, not to annoy you with our detestable company, but——"

"Please don't be revengeful," entreated the ex-Brat. "You have been so good to us, don't be ungood now. I suppose one may hate men, yet be grateful to one man—anyhow, till one finds him out? I can't very well find you out between here and Aosta, can I?—so we may be friends, if you'll walk beside me, neither behind nor in front. I am excited, and feel as if I *must* have someone to talk to, but I am a little tired of conversation with Innocentina. I know all she has ever thought about since she was born."

"It's a bargain then," said I. "We're friends and comrades—until Aosta. After that——"

"Each goes his own way," he finished my broken sentence; "as ships pass in the night. But this little sailing boat won't forget that the big bark came to its help, in a storm which it couldn't have weathered alone."

"Do you know," said I, as we walked on together, the muleteer and the donkey girl behind us, with the animals, "you are a very odd boy. I suppose it is being American. Are all American boys like you?"

"Yes," said he, twinkling, "all. I am cut on exactly the same pattern as the rest," and he smiled a charming smile, of which I could not resist the curious fascination. "Did you never meet any American boys, till you met me?"

"I can't remember having any real conversation with one, except once. His mother had asked me in his presence (it was in New York) how I liked America, and I had answered that it dazzled me; that the only yearning I felt was for something dark and quiet, and small and uncomfortable. She was rather pleased, but the boy put a string across the drawing-room door when I went out, and tripped me up. Then we had a little conversation—quite a short one—but full of repartee. That's my solitary experience."

"I should have wanted to trip you up for that speech, too; so you see the likeness is proved. It is a funny thing, I know very few Englishmen. I've met several, but, as you say, I never had any real conversation with them."

"Maybe, if you had, you wouldn't be so down on your sex when it has reached adolescence."

"I'm afraid there isn't much difference in men, whatever their country. But it's—their attitude towards women which I hate."

I laughed. "What do you know about that?"

"I have a sister," said he, after a minute's pause. And he did not laugh. "She and I have been—tremendous chums all our lives. There isn't a thing she has done, or a thought she has had, that I don't know, and the other way round, of course."

"Twins?" I asked.

"She is twenty-one."

"Oh, four or five years older than you."

The boy evidently did not take this as a question. "She is unfortunately an heiress," he said. "Money has brought misery upon her, and through her, on me; for if she suffers, I suffer too. She used to believe in everybody. She thought men were even more sincere and upright than women, because their outlook on life was larger, and so it was easy for her to be deceived. When she came out she wasn't quite eighteen (you see we have no father or mother, only a lazy old guardian-uncle), and she thought everyone was wonderfully kind to her, so she was very happy. I suppose there never was a happier girl—for a while. But by-and-bye she began to find out things. She discovered that the men who seemed the nicest only cared for her money, not for her at all."

"How could she be sure of that?"

"It was proved, over and over again, in lots of ways."

"But if she is a pretty and charming girl——"

"I think she is only odd—like me. People don't understand her, especially men. They find her strange, and men don't like girls to be strange."

"Don't they? I thought they did."

"Think for yourself. Have you ever been at all in love? And if you have, wasn't the girl quite, quite conventional; just a nice sweet girl, who was pretty, and who flirted, and who was too properly brought up ever to do or to say anything to surprise you?"

"Well," I admitted, my mind reviewing this portrait of Helen, which was really a well-sketched likeness, "now you put it in that way, I confess the girl I've cared for most was of the type you describe. I can see that now, though I didn't think of it then."

"No, you wouldn't; men don't. My sister soon learned that she wasn't really the sort of girl to be popular, though she had dozens of proposals, heaps of flowers every day, had to split up each dance several times at a ball, and all that kind of thing. It was a shock to find out *why*. To her face, they called her 'Princess,' and she was pleased with the nickname at first, poor thing. She took it for a compliment to herself. But she came to know that behind her back it was different; she was the 'Manitou Princess.' You see, the money, or most of it, came because father owned the biggest silver mines in Colorado, and he named the principal one 'Manitou,' after the Indian spirit. I shan't forget the day when a man she'd just refused, told her the vulgar nickname—and a few other things that hurt. But I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. I wanted to get away from you yesterday, because I—don't care to meet people. Everything seems different though, now. I suppose it's because you saved our lives. I feel as if you weren't exactly a new person, but as if—I'd known you a long time."

"I have the same sort of feeling about you, for some queer reason," said I. "Are we also to know each other's names?"

"No," he answered quickly. "That would spoil the charm: for there is a charm, isn't there? But we won't call each other Brat and Brute any more. That's ancient history. I'll be for you—just Boy. I think I will call you Man."

"But you hate Man."

"I don't hate you. If I were a girl I might, but as it is, I don't. I like you—Man."

"And I like you, Boy. We are pals now. Shall we shake hands?"

We did. I could have crushed his little brown paw, if I had not manipulated it carefully.

After that, we did not talk much. By-and-bye, he was tired, and remounted his donkey, but we still kept side by side, Innocentina sending at intervals a perfunctory cry of "Fanny-anny," from a distance, by way of keeping the small brown *âne* to her work.

So we reached the beautiful valley of Aosta, as the transparent azure veil of the Italian dusk was drawn, and out of that dusk glimmered now and then, as if born of the shadows, strange, stunted, and misshapen forms, gnome-like creatures, who stood aside to let us pass along the road. It was as if the Brownie Club were out for a night excursion; and I remembered my muleteer's lecture about the *crétins* of this happy valley. These were some of them, going back to town from their day's work in the fields. I had set my mind upon stopping at a hotel of which Joseph had told me, extolling its situation at a distance from Aosta *ville*, the wonderful mountain-pictures its windows framed, and

a certain pastoral primitiveness, not derogatory to comfort, which I should find in the *ménage*. But when my late enemy and new chum remarked that he was going to the Mont Blanc, I hesitated.

"And you?" he asked.

"Oh, I—well, I had thought—but it doesn't matter."

"I see what you mean. Would it be disagreeable for you if I were in the same hotel?"

"On the contrary. But you——"

"I know now that we shall never rub each other up the wrong way—again. Besides, we shan't have the chance. I suppose you go on somewhere else to-morrow?"

"No, I want to stop a day or two. Some friends have asked me to tell them about the sights of the neighbourhood, and what sort of motoring roads there are near by."

"I'm stopping, too. So, after all, the little sailing boat and the big bark aren't going to pass each other this night? They are to anchor in the same harbour for a while."

"And here's the harbour," said I, for we had come down from the hills into a marvellous old town of ancient towers and arches, with a background of white mountains. Molly should have been satisfied. I had obeyed her instructions to the letter, and I was in Aosta at last.

CHAPTER XIII

Afternoon Calls

"If you climb to our castle's top
I don't see where your eyes can stop."
—Robert Browning.

Our hotel had a big loggia, as large as a good-sized room, and we dined in it, with a gorgeous stage setting. The mountains floated in mid-sky, pearly pale, and magical under the rising moon. The little circle of light from our pink-shaded candles on the table (I say our, because Boy and I dined together) gave to the picture a bizarre effect, which French artists love to put on canvas; a blur of gold-and-rose artificial light, blending with the silver-green radiance of a full moon.

I don't know what we had to eat, except that there were trout from the river, and luscious strawberries and cream; but I know that the dinner seemed perfect, and that the head waiter, a delightful person, brought us champagne, with a long-handled saucepan wrapped in an immaculate napkin, to do duty as an ice-pail. I wondered why I had not come long ago to this place, named in honour of Augustus Cæsar, and why everybody else did not come. The ex-Brat was in the same frame of mind. We talked of more things than are dreamed of in philosophy — (other people's philosophy) — and there was not a book which was a dear friend of mine that was not a friend of this strange child's.

We sat until the moon was high, and the candles low. I felt curiously happy and excited, a mood no doubt due in part to the climate of Aosta, in part to the discovery of a congenial spirit, where I had least expected to find one.

Last night, we had been, at best, on terms of armed neutrality; to-night we were friends, and would continue friends, though we parted to-morrow. But parting was not what we thought of at the moment. On the contrary, half to our surprise, we found ourselves planning to see Aosta in each other's company.

After ten o'clock, when, deliciously fatigued, I was on my way to my room along a great arcaded balcony which ran the length of the house, I met Joseph, lying in wait for me. My conscience pricked. I had forgotten to send the poor, tired fellow definite instructions for the next day. He had come to solicit them, but, if I could judge by moonlight, he looked far from jaded; indeed, he had an air of alertness, for him almost of gaiety.

"You and Finois can have a rest to-morrow and the day after," said I, "while I do some sightseeing. I hear that I shall need one day at least for the town, and another for a drive to the châteaux and show-places of the neighbourhood. I hope you will be able to amuse yourself."

"Monsieur must not think of me. I shall do very well," dutifully replied Joseph.

"It is a pity that you and Innocentina do not get on. Otherwise——"

"Ah, perhaps I should tell monsieur that I may have misjudged the young woman a little. It seems a question of bringing up, more than real badness of heart. It is her tongue that is in fault; and I

am not even sure that with good influences she might not improve. I have been talking to her, Monsieur, of religion. She is black Catholic, and I Protestant, but I think that some of my arguments made a certain impression upon her mind."

After this, I gave myself no further anxiety about Joseph's to-morrow, but went to bed, and dreamed of fighting for the Boy's life, Gulliver-like, against a band of infuriated Brownies.

My first morning thought was to look out of all four windows at the mountains; my next, to ring for a bath.

Now, as a rule, your morning tub is a function you are not supposed to describe in detail; but not to picture the ceremony as performed at Aosta, is to pass by the place without giving the proper dash of local colour.

I rang. A girl appeared who struck me as singularly beautiful, but I discovered later that all girls are more or less beautiful at Aosta. The propriety of this morning visit was insured by the white cap, which was, so to speak, an adequate chaperon. On my request for a bath, the beauty looked somewhat agitated, but, after reflection, said that she would fetch one, and vanished, tripping lightly along the balcony.

Twenty minutes then passed, and at the end of that time the young lady returned, almost obliterated by an enormous linen sheet which engulfed her like an avalanche. She was accompanied by a man and a boy, staggering under a strange object which resembled a vast arm-chair, of the grandfather variety. When placed on the floor, I became aware that it was a kind of cross between a throne and a bath-tub, and, having seen the huge sheet flung over

it, I still rested in doubt as to the latter's purpose. The man and boy, who had not stood upon the order of their going, returned after an embarrassing absence, with pails of water, the contents of which, to my surprise, they flung upon the sheet.

I tried to explain that, if this were a bath, I preferred it without the family linen, but the *femme de chambre* seemed so shocked at these protestations, that I ceased uttering them, and determined to make the best of things as they stood.

When I was again alone, after several rehearsals I found a way of accommodating the human form to the hybrid receptacle, and was amazed at its luxuriousness. The secret of this lay in the sheet, which was fragrant of lavender, and protected the body from contact with a cold, base metal which hundreds of other bodies must have touched before.

"'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands," might be said of a hotel bath-tub as well as of a stolen purse; and having once known the linen-lined bath of Aosta, I was promptly spoiled for common, un-lined tubs. This was a lesson not to form hasty opinions; but being a normal man, I shall no doubt continue to do so until the day of my death.

The Boy and I broke our fast together on the loggia, which was even more entertaining as a *salle-à-manger* by morning than by night. The coffee was exquisite; the hot, foaming milk had but lately been drawn from its original source, a little biscuit-coloured Alderney with the pleading eyes of that fair nymph stricken to heiferhood by jealous Juno. The strawberries and figs came to the table from the hotel garden, and so did the luscious roses, which filled a bowl in the centre of our small white table.

This was Arcadia. The very simplicities of the hotel endeared it to our hearts, and there was no real comfort lacking which we could have obtained in London or in Paris.

After breakfast we set off with our cameras to the town, a walk of ten or fifteen minutes. It was strange, in this pilgrimage of mine, how often I found myself running back into the Feudal or Middle Ages, as far removed from the familiar bustle of modern days as if an iron door had been shut and padlocked behind me.

There was little of the Twentieth Century in Aosta (named by Augustus the "Rome of the Alps"), except the monument to "Le Roi Chasseur," and the bookshops, which seemed extraordinarily well supplied with the best literature of all countries. The type of face we met was primitive; scarcely one which would have been out of place on some old Roman coin. Here, at the end of a narrow, shadowed street, where St. Anselm first saw the light (it must have been with difficulty) we came upon a magnificent archway, built to do honour to Augustus Cæsar's defeat of the brave Salasses, four and twenty years before the world had a Saviour. A few steps further on, and we were under the majestic mass of the Porta Pretoria; or we were crossing a Roman bridge, or gazing at the ruins of Roman ramparts. Or, we lost our way in searching for the amphitheatre, and found ourselves suddenly skipping over centuries into the Middle Ages, represented by the mysterious Tour Bramafam, the Tour des Prisons, or the Tour du Lepreux, round which Xavier Maistre wrote his pathetic dialogue. Then, there was the cathedral with its extraordinary painted façade, like a great coloured picture-book;

and the tall cross, straddling a spring in a paved street, put up in thanksgiving by the Aostans when they joyfully saw Calvin's back for the last time.

We spent all day in sightseeing, and had another moonlight evening on the loggia. We were great pals now, Boy and I. I had never met anyone in the least like him. At one moment he was a human boy, almost a child; at another his brain leaped beyond mine, and he became a poet or a philosopher; again he was an elfin sprite, a creature for whom Puck was the one thinkable name. There was a single thing only, about which you could always be sure. He would never be twice the same.

Still, though we were friends, "Boy" and "Man" we remained. He kept his name a secret, and he had forbidden me to mention mine. Nor had he spoken of his route or destination, after Aosta. As to this I was curious, for I knew now that it would be a wrench to part with the strange little being whose ears I had tingled to box three days (or was it three years?) ago. Already he had done me good; and though I had hardly reached the point of confessing as much to myself, as a plain matter of fact I would not have exchanged his quaint companionship for that of my lost love. How she would have hated this idyllic Arcadia! How *triste* she would have been; how weary after a day's tour among relics of past ages; and how much she would have preferred Bond Street to the Arch of Augustus, or the park to our snow mountains and green valley! Even Davos she would have found intolerable had it not been for the tobogganing, the dances and the theatricals, in all of which she had played a leading part. Deep down in the darkest corner of

my soul, I now knew that I would not have fallen in love with Helen Blantock had I first met her in Aosta.

The Boy and I agreed that our head waiter was one of the nicest men we had ever met, and when he pledged his personal honour that a day's wandering among neighbouring castles would be "very repaying," we determined to bolt the five he most recommended in one gulp, on our second and last afternoon. If he could, he would have sent us spinning like teetotums from one concentric ring of historic châteaux to another, until goodness knows how far from Aosta, Finois, Souris, and Fanny-anny, we should have ended. He would also have despatched us on a two or three days' excursion to Courmayeur; and I fear that his respect for us went down like mercury in a chilled thermometer, when he understood that we had not come to the country to do any of the famous climbs. He named so many, dear to the hearts of my Alpine Club acquaintances, that it would have taken us well into the new year to accomplish half; and he accepted with mild, disapproving resignation our fiat that there were other parts of the world worth seeing.

As we had to cover a radius of many miles, in our rounds of visits at the few sample châteaux we had selected from the waiter's list, we decided to spare our legs and those of the animals. It was hardly playing the game we had set out to play—we two strangely-met friends—to amble conventionally from show-house to show-house, in a carriage, with guide-books in our hands, like everyday tourists; nevertheless, we did this unworthy thing. Perhaps, therefore, I deserved the punishment which fell upon me.

Little did I dream, when I flippantly spoke of our expedition as "driving out to pay calls," how nearly my thoughtless words were to be realised. We started immediately after an early *déjeuner,* sitting side by side in a little low-swung carriage, a superior phaeton, or poor relation of a victoria. The day was hot, but a delicious breeze came to us from the snow mountains, and there was a peculiar buoyancy in the air.

Our first castle was Sarre, the Château Royal, an enormous brown building with a disproportionately high tower. This hunting-lodge of the King would have been grimly ugly, were it not for its rocky throne, high above the river bed, and its background of glistening white mountains. The huge pile looked like a sleeping dragon with its hundreds of window-eyes close-lidded, and I could not imagine it an amusing place for a house party. I was glad that the Boy was not animated with that wild mania for squeezing the last drop from the orange of sight-seeing which makes some travelling companions so depressing. The castle was closed to visitors, yet many people would have insisted on climbing the steep hill for the barren satisfaction of saying that they had been there. I rejoiced that my little Pal was not one of these; but I should have been more prudent had I waited.

We drove on, after a pause for inspection, along a road which would have rejoiced the motor-loving heart of Jack Winston, and I made a note to tell him what a magnificent tour he might have in this enchanted country one day with his car, tooling down from Milan. As I mentally arranged my next letter to the Winstons, the Boy gave a little cry of delight. "Oh, what a queer, delightful place!

It's all towers, just held together by a thread of castle. It must be Aymaville."

I looked up and beheld on a high hill an extraordinary château, something like four chess castles grouped together at the corners of a square heap of dice. It does not sound an attractive description, yet the place deserved that adjective. It was charming, and wonderfully "liveable," among its vineyards, commanding such a view as is given to few showplaces in the world.

"The descendants of the original family have restored it, and live there, don't they?" asked the Boy in Italian of the *cocher*.

The man answered that this was the case, and was inspired by my evil genius to enquire if *ces messieurs* would like to go over the château.

"Is it allowed?" the Boy questioned eagerly.

"But certainly. Shall I drive up to the house? It will be only an all little ten minutes."

Without waiting for my answer, the Boy took my consent for granted, and said yes.

Instantly we left the broad white road, and began winding up a narrow, steep, and stony way, among vineyards. The *cocher's* all little ten minutes lengthened into half an hour, but at last we halted before a garden gate—a high, uncompromising, reserved-looking gate.

"The fellow must be mistaken," said I. "This place has not the air of encouraging visitors;" but, before the words were out of my mouth, the enterprising *cocher* had rung the gate bell.

After an interval a gardener appeared, and betrayed such mild, ingenuous surprise at sight of us that I wished ourselves anywhere else than before the portals of the Château d'Aymaville. Gladly

would I have whipped up our fat, barrel-shaped nag, and driven into the nearest rabbit-hole, but it was too late. The gardener took the enquiry as to whether visitors were admitted, with the gravity he would have given to a question in the catechism: Is your name N. or M.? Can one see your master's house?

Oh, without doubt, one could see the house. Would *les messieurs* kindly accompany him? His aspect wept, and mine (unless it belied me) copied his. "Isn't it hateful?" I asked, *sotto voce,* of the Boy, expecting sympathy which I did not get. "No, I think it's great fun," said he.

"But I'm sure they are not in the habit of showing the house. You can tell by the man's manner. He's nonplussed. I should think no one has ever had the cheek to apply for permission before."

"Then they ought to be complimented because we have."

I was silenced, though far from convinced; but if you have made an engagement with an executioner, it is a point of honour not to sneak off and leave him in the lurch, when he has taken the trouble to sharpen his axe, and put on his red suit and mask for your benefit.

We arrived, after a walk through a pretty garden, upon a terrace where there was a marvellous view. The gardener showed it to us solemnly, we pacing after him all round the château, as if we played a game. At the open front door we were left alone for a few minutes, heavy with suspense, while our guide held secret conclave with a personable woman who was no doubt a housekeeper. Astonished, but civil, with dignified Italian courtesy she finally

invited us in, and I was coward enough to let the Boy lead, I following with a casual air, meant to show that I had been dragged into this business against my will; that I was, in fact, the tail of a comet which must go where the comet leads.

Everywhere, inside the castle, were traces that the family had fled with precipitation. Here was a bicycle leaning abject against a wall; there, an open book thrown on the floor; here, a fallen chair; there, a dropped piece of sewing.

Once or twice in England, I had stayed in a famous show-house, and my experience on the public Thursdays there had taught me what these people were enduring now. At Waldron Castle we had been hunted from pillar to post; if we darted from the hall into a drawing-room, the public would file in before we could escape to the boudoir; the lives of foxes in the hunting season could have been little less disturbed than ours, and we were practically only safe in our own or each other's bedrooms—indeed, any port was precious in a storm.

By the time that the Boy and I had been led, like stalled oxen, through a long series of living-rooms, I knowing that the rightful inhabitants were panting in wardrobes, my nerves were shattered. I admired everything, volubly but hastily, and broke into fireworks of adjectives, always edging a little nearer to the exit, though not, I regret to say, invariably aided by the Boy. He, indeed, seemed to find an impish pleasure in my discomfiture.

During the round, I was dimly conscious that the entire staff of servants, most of them maids, and embarrassingly beautiful, flitted after us like the ghosts who accompanied Dante and his guide on their tour

of the Seven Circles. As, at last, we returned to the square entrance hall, they melted out of sight, still like shadows, and I had a final moment of extreme anguish when, at the door, the housekeeper refused the ten francs I attempted to press into her haughty Italian palm.

"No more afternoon calls on châteaux for me, after *that* experience," I gasped, when we were safely seated in the homelike vehicle which I had not sufficiently appreciated before.

"Oh, I shall be disappointed if you won't go with me to the Château of St. Pierre which we saw in the photograph—that quaint mass of towers and pinnacles, on the very top of a peaked rock," said the Boy. "I've been looking forward to it more than to anything else, but I shan't have courage to do it alone."

"Courage?" I echoed. "After the brazen way in which you stalked through the scattered belongings of the family at Aymaville, you would stop at nothing."

"In other words, I suppose you think me a typical Yankee boy? But I really was nervous, and inclined to apologise to somebody for being alive. That's why I can't go through another such ordeal without company; yet I wouldn't miss this eleventh-century castle for a bag of your English sovereigns."

"If only it had been left alone, and not restored!" I groaned. "In that case we should meet no one but bats."

"We? Then you will go with me?"

"I suppose so," I sighed. "It can't add more than a dozen grey hairs, and what are they among so many?"

A few kilometres further on we reached the "bizarre monticule," from which sprouted a still more bizarre château. From our low level, it was impossible to tell where the rock stopped, and where the castle began, so deftly had man seized every point of vantage offered by Nature—and "points" they literally were.

The ascent from the road to the château was much like climbing a fire-escape to the top of a New York sky-scraper, but we earned the right to cry "Excelsior!" at last, had we not by that moment been speechless. History now repeated itself. I rang; the castle gate was opened, but this time by a major-domo, who had already in some marvellous way learned that strangers might be expected.

Never was so appallingly hospitable a man, and I trusted that even the Boy suffered from his kindness. Madame la Baronne, who was away for the afternoon, would chide him if guests were allowed to leave her house without refreshment. Eat we must, and drink we must, in the beautiful hall evidently used as a sitting-room by the absent châtelaine. Her wine and her cakes were served on an ancient silver tray, almost as old as the family traditions, and it was not until we had done to both such justice as the major-domo thought fair that he would consent to let us go further.

The house was really of superlative interest, though spoiled here and there by eccentric modern decoration. Much of the window glass had remained intact through centuries; the walls were twelve feet thick; the oak-beamed ceilings magnificent, and the secret stairways and rooms in the thickness of the walls, bewildering; but when our conductor began leading us into the bedrooms in

daily use by the ladies of the castle, my gorge rose. "This is awful," I said. "I can't go on. What if Madame la Baronne returns and finds a strange man and a boy in her bedroom? Good heavens, now he's opening the door of the bath!"

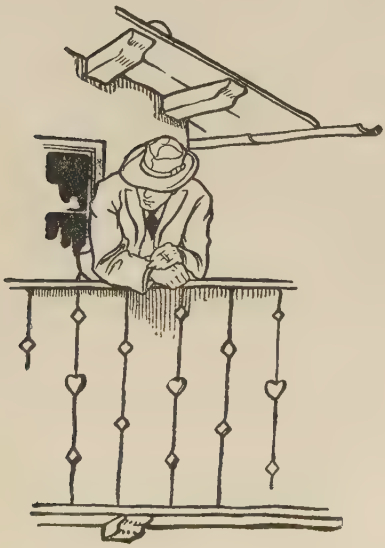
"We must go on," whispered the Boy, convulsed with silent laughter. "If we don't, the major-domo won't understand our scruples. He'll think we're tired, and don't appreciate the castle. It would never do to hurt his feelings, when he has been so kind."

"To the bitter end, then," I answered desperately; and no sooner were the words out of my mouth than the bitter end came. It consisted of a collision with the Baronne's dressing-jacket, which hung from a hook, and tapped me on the shoulder with one empty frilled sleeve, in soft admonition. I could bear no more. One must draw the line somewhere, and I drew the line at intruding upon ladies' dressing-jackets in their most sacred fastnesses.

If I had been a woman, my pent-up emotion at this moment would have culminated in hysterics, but being a man, I merely bolted, stumbling, as I fled, over my absent hostess' bedroom slippers. I scuttled down a winding flight of tower stairs, broke incontinently into a lighted region which turned out to be a kitchen, startled the cook, apologised incoherently, and somehow found myself, like Alice in Wonderland, back in the great entrance hall. There, starting at every sound, lest a returning family party should catch me "lurking," I awaited the Boy.

We left, finally, showering francs and compliments; but I crawled out a decrepid wreck, and

refused pitilessly to do more than view the exterior of other châteaux. It was evening when we saw our white hotel once more, and a haze of starlight dusted the sky and all the blue distance with silver powder.



CHAPTER XIV

The Path of the Moon

"And then they came to the turnstile of night."
—Rudyard Kipling.

This was to be our last night at Aosta, perhaps our last night together, for the Boy's plans kept his name company in some secret "hidie hole" of his mind. As, for the third time, we dined on the loggia, before the rising of the moon, we drifted into talk of intimate things. It was I who began it. I harked back to the broken conversation which had first made us friends, and to his chance sketch of Helen Blantock and her type. In that connection, I ventured to bring up the subject of his sister.

"What you said about her disillusionment interested me very much," I told him. "You see, I've just come through an experience something like it myself. Do you mind talking about her?"

"Not in this place—and this mood—and to you," he answered. "But first—what disillusioned you?"

"Disappointment in someone I cared for,—and believed in."

"It was the same with—my sister."

"Poor Princess."

"Yes, poor Princess. Was it—a man friend who disappointed you?"

"A woman. The old story. As a matter of fact, she threw me over because another fellow had a lot more money than I."

"Horrid creature."

"Oh, just an ordinary, conventional, well brought up girl. Now you see I have as much right to a grudge against women, as your sister the Princess has against men."

"But I don't believe the girl *could* have been as cruel to you, as this man I'm thinking of was to—her. They'd known each other for years, since childhood. He used to call her his 'little sweetheart' when she was ten and he was fifteen. How was she to dream that even when he was a boy, he didn't really like her better than other little girls, that already he was making calculations about her money? She thought he was different from the others, that *he* cared for herself. They were engaged, the bridesmaids asked, the trousseau ready, the invitations out for the wedding, and then—one night she overheard a conversation between him and a cousin of his, who was to be one of her bridesmaids. Only a few words—but they told everything. It was the other girl he loved, and had always loved. But he was poor, and so—well, you can guess the rest. My sister broke off her engagement the next day, though the man went on his knees to her, and vowed he had been mad. Then she left home at once, and soon she was taken very ill."

"She loved that worthless scoundrel so much?"

"I don't know. I don't think she knows. It was the destruction of an ideal which was terrible. She had clung to it. She had said to herself: 'Many men may be false, and mercenary, and unscrupulous, but this one is true.' Suddenly, he had ceased to exist for her. She stood alone in the world—in the dark."

"Except for you."

"Except for me, and a few friends,—one girl especially, who was heavenly to her. But the dearest girl friend can't make up for the loss of trust in a lover."

"That's true. By Jove, I thought I had been roughly used, but it's nothing to this. I feel as if I knew your sister, somehow. I wonder, since you and she are such pals, that you can bear to leave her."

"She wanted to be alone. She said she didn't feel at home in life any more, and it made her restless to be with anyone who knew her trouble, anyone who pitied her. I was ill too,—from sympathy, I suppose, and—she thought a tramp like this would do me good. So it has. Being close to nature, especially among mountains, as I've been for weeks now, makes one's troubles and even one's sister's troubles seem small."

"You are young to feel that."

"My soul isn't as young as my body. Maybe that's why nature is so much to me. I am more alive when I'm away from big towns. Sunrises and sunsets are more important than the rising and falling of money markets. They—and the wind in the trees. What things they say to you! You can't explain; you can only feel. And when you *have* felt, when you have heard colour, and seen sounds, you are never quite the same, quite as sad, again,—I mean if you *have* been sad."

"I've said all that—precisely that—to myself lately," I exclaimed, forgetting that I was a man talking to a child. The strange little person whom I had apostrophised as "Brat" seemed not only an equal, but a superior. I found myself intensely interested in him, and all that concerned him.

"Odd, that you, too, should have thought that thing about colour and sound! This evening-blue, for instance. Do you hear the music of it?"

"Yes. I'm not sure it isn't that which has made me answer your questions. But now let's talk of something else—or better still, let's not talk at all, for a while."

We were silent, and I wondered if the Boy's thoughts ran with mine, or if he had closed and locked the secret door in his brain, and listened dreamily to the sweet evening voices of this Valley of Musical Bells.

Suddenly, into the many sounds of the silence, broke a loud and jarring note; the trampling of men's feet and horses' hoofs; loud laughter and the jingling of accoutrements. We looked over the balustrade to see a battalion of soldiers marching at ease, on their way back from some mountain manœuvres, and as we gazed down, they stared up, a young fellow shouting to the Boy that he had better join them.

"It's like life calling one back," said the strange child. "I suppose one must always go on, somewhere else. And we—we must go on, though it is sweet here."

"It was what I was thinking of just now," I answered. "Are we to part company?"

The Boy laughed—an odd little laugh. "Why, that depends," said he abruptly, "on where you are going. I've planned to walk back over the St. Bernard to Martigny, and so by way of the Tête Noire to Chamounix. That name—Chamounix—has always been to my ears, as Stevenson says, 'like the horns of elf-land, or crimson lake.' I want to come face to face with Mont Blanc, of which I've

only seen a far-off mirage, long ago when I was a little chap, at Geneva. What are your plans?"

"If I ever had any, I've forgotten them," said I. "Look here, Little Pal, shall we join forces as far as—as far as——"

"The turnstile," he finished my broken sentence.

"Where is the turnstile?"

"At the place—whatever it may be—where we get tired of each other. Isn't that what you meant?"

"According to my present views, that place might be at the other end of the world. You must remember it was never I who tried to get away from you. At the Cantine de Proz, I——"

"Don't let's remember to that time. Then, I didn't know that you were—You. That makes all the difference. You looked as if you might be nice, but I've learned not to trust first impressions, especially of men—grown-up men. There are such lots of people one drifts across, who are not *real* people at all, but just shells, with little rattling nuts of dull, imitation ideas inside, taken from newspapers, or borrowed from their friends. Fancy what it would be to see glorious places with such a companion! It would drive me mad. I determined not to make acquaintances on this trip; but you—why, I feel now as if it would be almost insulting you to call you 'an acquaintance.' We are—oh, I'll take your word! We're 'pals,' and Something big that's over all meant us to be pals. I don't mind telling you, Man, that I should miss you, if we parted now."

"We won't part," I said quickly. "We'll jog along together. Have a cigarette? I'm going to smoke a pipe, because I feel contented."

Between puffs of that pipe (an instrument which

I strongly but vainly recommended to the Boy) I told him of my night drive over the St. Gothard. As it was his whim to consider names of no importance, I did not mention that of Jack and Molly Winston, but spoke of them merely as "my friends."

"Could we do the St. Bernard at night?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, we could, if we saved ourselves by driving up from here to St. Rhémy, after *déjeuner,* otherwise it would mean being on foot all day and all night too. We could send Joseph, Innocentina, and the animals on very early to-morrow morning, to the Hospice, where they might rest till evening. The good monks would give us a meal of some sort about six, and at seven we could leave the Hospice. There would be an interval of starry darkness, and then we should have the full moon."

"Splendid to see the Pass by moonlight, after knowing it by day, and sunset, and dawn! It would be like finding out wonderful new qualities in your friends, which you'd never guessed they had."

Thus the Boy; and a few moments later the details of our journey were arranged. Joseph and Innocentina were interrupted in the midst of ardent attempts to convert one another, to be told what was in store for them. They did not appear averse to the arrangement, for a slight pout of the young woman's hardly counted; there was no doubt that a journey *à deux* would offer infinite opportunities for religious disputation.

As for the Little Pal and me, we carried out the first part of our programme to the letter. Two barrel-shaped nags instead of one took us to St. Rhémy, the little mountain village whose men are

exempt from conscription, and called, poetically yet literally, "Soldiers of the Snow." Further up the jewelled way, our little victoria could not venture, and we trod the steep path side by side, the Boy stepping out bravely, the top of his panama on a level with my ear.

Some magnetic cord of communication between his brain and mine telegraphed back and forth, without personal intervention on either part, my keen enjoyment of the scene, and his. We did not talk much, but each knew what the other was feeling. Most people disappoint you by their lack of capacity to enjoy nature, in moments which are superlative to you—moments which alone would repay you for the whole trouble of living through blank years. But this boy's spirit responded to beauty, up to an extreme point which was highly satisfactory. I saw it in the exaltation on his little sunburned face.

Joseph and Innocentina were ostentatiously delighted to greet us at the Hospice. They and the animals had had their evening meal, and were ready to start when we wished. We went to the refectory and dined in company with many persons of many nationalities, who had just arrived from the Swiss and Italian valleys. Some of them manipulated their food strangely, as I had noticed here before; and Boy confided to me his opinion that it was a pity human beings were still obliged to eat with their mouths, like the lower animals. "It's a disgrace to one's face, which ought to be exclusively for better things. It's really too primitive, this penny-in-the-slot sort of arrangement. There ought to be a tiny trap-door in one's chest somewhere, so that one could just slip food in unobtrusively, at a meal, and

go on talking and laughing as if nothing had happened."

We were not long in dining, but by the time we came out again into the biting cold, late afternoon had changed to early evening.

It was sunset. The great mountain shapes of glittering, red gold were clear as the profiles of goddesses, against a sky of rose. One—the grandest goddess of all—wore on her proud head a crown of snow which sparkled with diamond coruscations, rainbow-tinted in the pink light. Below her golden forehead hovered a thin cloud-veil, of pale lilac; and we had gone a long way down the mountain before the ineffable colour burned to ashes-of-rose. Then darkness caught and engulfed us, in the Valley of Death. The rushing of the river in its ravine was like the voice of night, not a separate sound at all, for hearing it was to hear the silence.

By-and-bye we grew conscious of a faint, gradual revealing of the mountain-tops, which for a time had been black, jagged pieces cut out from the spangled fabric of a starry sky. A ripple of pearly light wavered over them, like the reflection of the unseen river mirrored for the Lady of Shalott.

It was a strange, living light, beating with a visible pulse, and it slowly grew until its white radiance had extinguished the individual lamps of the stars. Waterfalls flashed out of darkness, like white, laughing nymphs flinging off black masks and dominoes; silver goblets and diamond necklaces were flung into the river bed, and vanished forever with a mystic gleam.

"If there's a heaven, can there be anything in it better than this, Little Pal?" I asked.

"There can be God," he said. "I'm a pagan

sometimes in the sun, but never on a night like this. Then one *knows* things one isn't sure of at other times. Why, I suppose there isn't really a world at all! God is simply thinking of these things, and of us, so we and they seem to be. We are his thoughts; the mountains, and the river, and the wild-flowers are his thoughts. It's just as if an author writes a story. In the story, all the people and the things which concern them are real, but you close the volume and they simply don't exist. Only God doesn't close the volume, I think, until the next is ready."

"I wonder whether we'll both come into the next story?"

"Who knows? Perhaps you'll wander into one story, and I'll get lost in another."

A certain sadness fell upon me, born partly of our talk, partly of the poignant beauty of the night.

We came to the Cantine de Proz, fast asleep in its lonely valley, and so we went on and on, our souls tuned to music and poetry by the song of the stars and the beauty of the night. But slowly a change stole over us. For a long time I was only dimly conscious of it, in a puzzled way, in myself. Why was it that my spirit stood no longer on the heights? Why did the moonlight look cold and metallic? Why had the rushing sound of the river got on my nerves, like the monotonous crying of a fretful child? Why did our frequent silences no longer tingle with a meaning which there was no need to express in words? Why was my brain empty of impressions as a squeezed sponge of water? Why, in fact, though everything was outwardly the same, why was all in reality different?

"Oh, Man, I'm so hungry!" sighed Boy.

"By Jove, that's what's been the matter with me this last half-hour, and I didn't know it!" said I.

"I feel as if I could form a hollow square, all by myself."

"I only wish there were something to form it round."

"But there isn't—except a few chocolate creams I bought in Aosta because I respected their old age, poor things."

"Perhaps even decrepid chocolates are better than nothing. Let's give 'em honourable burial—unless you want them all to yourself, as you did the chicken at the 'Déjeûner,' and the room at the Cantine de Proz."

"Oh, you *must* have thought I was selfish! But truly, I don't think I am. It wasn't that. Only—I can't explain."

"You needn't," said I. "I was 'kidding'—a most appropriate treatment for a man of your size. What I want is food, not explanations."

The chocolates, which proved to be eighteen in number, were fairly divided, Boy refusing to accept more than his half. We each ate one with distaste, because the celebrated "Right Spot" was not to be pacified by unsuitable sacrifices; but presently it relented and demanded more. Appeased for the moment, the Spot allowed us to proceed, but incredibly soon it began again to clamour. We ate several more chocolates, though our gorge rose against them as a means of refreshment. Still Bourg St. Pierre, where we were sooner or later to sleep, was far away, and for the third time we were driven to chocolate. It was a loathsome business eating the remaining morsels of our supply, and we

felt that the very name of the food would in future be abhorrent to us. The night had become unfriendly, the Pass a *Via Dolorosa,* and the last drop was poured into our cup of misery at Bourg St. Pierre.

We had wired from the Hospice for rooms, and expected to find the little "Déjeûner" cheerfully lighted, the plump landlady amusingly surprised to see the guests who had lately brought dissension into her house returning peaceably together. But the roadside inn was asleep like a comfortable white goose with its head under its wing. Not a gleam in any window, save the bleak glint of moonlight on glass.

Joseph and Innocentina were behind us with their charges, whose stored crusts of bread they had probably shared. I knocked at the door. No responsive sound from within. I pounded with my walking stick. A thin imp of echo mocked us, and, my worst passions roused by this inhospitality falling on top of nine chocolate creams, I almost beat the door down.

Two sleepy eyelid-windows flew up, and a moment later a little servant who had served me the other afternoon, appeared at the door like a frightened rabbit at bay.

I demanded the wherefore of this reception; I demanded rooms and food and reparation. What, was I the monsieur who had telegraphed from the Hospice? But madame had answered that she had not a room in the house. The carriage of a large party of very high nobility had broken down late in the afternoon, and they were remaining for the night, until the damage could be repaired. What to do? But there was nothing, unless *les messieurs*

would sleep, one on the sofa, the other on the floor, in the room of the "*déjeûner*."

"I suppose we'll have to put up with that accommodation, then. What do you say, Boy?" I asked.

"I would rather go on," he replied, in a tone of misery tempered by desperate resignation, as if he had been giving orders for his own funeral.

"Go on where?" I enquired grimly.

"I don't know. Anywhere."

"'Anywhere' means in this instance the open road."

"Well—I'm not so *very* cold, are you? And I'm sure they'll give us a little bread and cheese here."

"I think it would be wiser to stop," said I. "We might see the ghost of Napoleon eating the *déjeuner*. Isn't that an inducement?"

"Not enough."

"I assure you that I don't snore or howl in my sleep. And you could have the sofa to curl up on."

"Ye-es; but I'd rather go on. You and Joseph can stop. Innocentina and I will be all right."

I was annoyed with the child. I felt that he fully deserved to be taken at his word, and deserted on the Pass, but I had not the heart to punish him. If anything should happen to the poor Babe in the Wood, I should never forgive myself; and besides, it would have been hopeless to seek sleep, with visions of disaster to this strange Little Pal of mine painting my brain red.

"Of course I won't do anything of the kind," I said crossly. "If one party goes on, both will go on." I then snappishly ordered food of some sort, any sort—except chocolate,—and having, after a blank interval, obtained enough bread, cheese,

and ham for at least ten persons, I divided the rations with Joseph and Innocentina, who had now come up.

We had a short halt for rest and refreshment, taken simultaneously, and presently set out again, with a vague idea of plodding on as far as Orsières. The Boy refused so obstinately to ride his donkey (I believe because I must go on foot), that Innocentina, thwarted, did frightful execution among her favourite saints. Joseph reproved her; she retorted by calling him a black heretic, and vowing that she had a right to talk as she pleased to her own saints; it was not his affair. Thus it was that our chastened cavalcade left the "Déjeûner."

After this, our journey was punctuated by frequent pauses. The donkeys were tired; everybody was cross; the calm indifference of the glorious night was as irritating as must have been the "icily regular, splendidly null" perfection of Maud herself.

Only the Boy kept up any pretence of spirits, and I knew well that his counterfeited buoyancy was merely to distract attention from guilt. If it had not been for him, we should all have been tucked away in some corner or other of the "Déjeûner." No doubt he would have dropped, had he not feared an "I told you so."

We were still some miles on the wrong side of Orsières, when Innocentina came running up from behind, exclaiming that a dreadful thing, an appalling thing, had happened. No, no, not an accident to Joseph Marcoz. A trouble far worse than that. Nothing to the *mulet ou les ânes.* Ah, but how could she break the news? It was that in some way —some mad, magical way only to be accounted for by the intervention of evil spirits, probably attracted

by the heretic presence of Joseph—the *rücksack* containing the fitted bag had disappeared. If she were to be killed for it, she—Innocentina—could not tell how this great calamity had occurred.

I thought that after such an alarming preface, the Boy would laugh when the mountain had brought forth its mouse, but he did no such thing. His little face looked anxious and forlorn in the white moonlight. And all for a mere bag, which was an absurd article of luggage, at best, for an excursion such as his!

"I *can't* lose it," he said. "There are things in it which I wouldn't have anyone s—which I couldn't replace."

"Your sister the Princess will buy you another," I tried to console him.

"This is her bag. She would feel dreadfully if it were gone. Besides, my diary-notes for the book I want to write are in it. I would give a thousand dollars to get it again—or more. I shall have to go back."

"No, you won't," I said. "As to that, I shall put my foot down. If anyone goes——"

"Nobody shall go but myself. I won't have it. I——"

"And I won't have you go, if I'm forced to snatch you up and put you in my pocket. When I get you safely to Orsières, I don't mind a bit——"

"No, no, you needn't say it. If we must go on to Orsières, I'll pay someone to come back from there, and search."

"Why shouldn't I be the one? I'm not tired, only rather cross, and for all you know, I may be in urgent need of the reward you mean to offer."

"You must be satisfied with your virtue. I've

my own reasons, and—and I suppose I'm my own master?"

"By Jove!" I exclaimed, laughing. "Eton would have done you a lot of good. You would have had some of your girly whims knocked out of you there, my kid."

"I wonder if that *would* have done me good?"

"It isn't too late to try. You haven't passed the age."

"I dare say travelling about with you will have much the same effect," said the Boy, suddenly become an imp again. "I think I'll just 'sample' that experiment first. But I *do* want my bag."

"Dash your bag! I'll lend you some night things out of the mule-pack. The lost treasure is sure to turn up again, like all bad pennies, to-morrow."

We reached Orsières and roused the people of the inn with comparative ease. They could give us accommodation, but the man of the house looked dubious when he heard that a runner must at once be found to search for a travelling bag, lost nobody knew where.

"To-morrow morning, when it is light——" he began; but Boy cut him short. "To-morrow morning may be too late. I will give five thousand francs to whoever finds my bag, and brings it back with everything in it undisturbed."

The man opened his eyes wide, and I formed my lips into a silent whistle. I thought the Boy exceedingly foolish to name such a reward, when the bag and its gold fittings could not have been worth more than a hundred pounds, and an offer of three hundred francs would have been ample. What could the strange little person have in his precious bag, which he valued as the immediate jewel of his soul? and

why would he not let me be the one to find it, thus keeping his five thousand francs in his pocket! He "had his reasons," forsooth! However, it was not my business.

It must have been after three o'clock by the time I fell asleep in a queer little room where you had but to sit up in bed and stretch out your arm to reach anything you wanted. I dreamed of journeying through the night with the Boy, but I forgot his lost bag; nor when I waked in full morning light, did I recall its tragic disappearance. I found that it was nearly eight, and bounded out of bed, performing my toilet with maimed rites, since baths were not *comme il faut* at Orsières.

"The kid will be asleep still, I'll bet," I said to myself; but looking out of the window at that moment, I saw him in conversation with Joseph, Innocentina, and—apparently—half the inhabitants of the village.

I hurried down, and learned that the bag—still a lost bag—had set all Orsières on fire with excitement. The searchers had returned empty-handed, having gone back as far as the Cantine de Proz; and on the oath of Innocentina (more than one, alas!), the *rücksack* and its contents had been secure on the grey back of Souris when we passed the Cantine. Desolate as was the Great St. Bernard at night, late as had been the hour when the bag vanished, evidently someone had found and gone off with it. Nevertheless, many young persons of both sexes were eager to try their luck in a second quest.

The Boy, who had been up for hours, had it in mind to wait at Orsières until his treasure should be found, or hope abandoned; but I suggested going on at once to Martigny. There, we could have

handbills printed, offering a large reward, and these could be distributed over the country. The diligence drivers would help in the work, and we could also advertise in a local paper. To this proposal the Little Pal consented, and we started off again upon our way, a sadder if not a wiser party.

It was late afternoon when we straggled into Martigny. Now, our far away Alpine Rome with its crumbling towers and castles, our remote heights where a grey monastery was ever mirrored in the blue eye of the mountain lake, seemed like phases of a dream.

Friends of the Boy's (nameless to me, like all links with his outside life) had stopped lately at the hotel where Molly, Jack, and I had stayed; he therefore proposed to go to the same house, and this jumped with my inclination: for the hotel had a cheerful and home-like individuality which I liked.

Pitying the Little Pal's distress, though I chaffed him for it, I undertook the business of getting out the handbills I had suggested, and arranging for an advertisement in a paper with a local circulation. I had to visit the post-office, engaging in a long discussion with the officials who controlled the diligence, and the business occupied more than an hour. In mercy to Boy, I had not delayed for any selfish attention to personal comfort, and tramping back through an inch of white dust to the hotel, I was still as travel-worn as on our arrival in the town, nearly two hours ago. I had forbidden the tired child to accompany me, and by this time he would no doubt be refreshed with a bath and a change of clothing, as, fortunately, not all his personal belongings had been contained in the ill-fated bag. He would be impatiently waiting for me at the hotel

door, perhaps; and I quickened my steps, in haste to give him details of my doings.

Entering the garden, I had to bound onto the grass, to escape being run over by a pair of horses prancing round the curve, at my back. I turned with a basilisk glare intended for the coachman, but instead met the astonished gaze of the very last eyes I could possibly have expected. My glare melted into a smile, but not one of my best, though the eyes which called it forth were alluringly beautiful.

"Contessa!" I exclaimed. "Is this you, or your astral body?"

"Lord Lane!" the lovely lady-of-the-eyes responded. "But no, it is not possible!"

Just as I was about to protest that it was not only possible, but certain, I caught sight of the Boy, in the doorway. As, at the Contessa's word, the carriage came to a sudden halt, she reaching out to me two little grey suède hands, the slim figure at the door drew back a step, as if involuntarily; but there was no getting round it, my Italian beauty had made Boy a present of my name, whether he wanted it or not.

CHAPTER XV

Enter the Contessa

"She was the smallest lady alive,
Made in a piece of nature's madness,
Too small, almost, for the life and gladness
That over-filled her."

—Robert Browning.

Here was a case of Mahomet, *en route* to pay his respects to the Mountain, being met halfway by the object of his pilgrimage; though to liken the Contessa di Ravello to a mountain is perhaps to brutalise a poetic license. She is a fairy of a woman, a pocket Venus. Gaetà is her name, and her sponsors in baptism must have been endowed with prophetic souls, for she is the very spirit of irresponsible, childlike gaiety.

Not that she has a sense of humour. There is all the difference in the world between a sense of humour and a sense of fun, and truth to tell, the Contessa had no more humour than a frolicsome kitten. She had always been in a frolic of some sort, when I had known her in Davos, whither she had gone because she thought it would be "what you call a lark"; and she was in a frolic now, judging by her merry laughter when she saw me.

Her great wine-brown eyes were laughing, her full, cupid-lips were laughing, and more than all, the two deep, round dimples in the olive cheeks were laughing. Even the little rings of black hair on her

low forehead seemed to quiver with mirth, as her head moved with quick, bird-like gestures. She was dressed all in grey, and the cut-steel buttons on her dress twinkled as if they too were in the joke.

"Fancy meeting you here, of all places!" she said, in her pretty English, lisping but correct. "It is a good gift from the saints. We have had such stupid adventures, and we have been so bored."

"We" were evidently the handsome, slightly moustached women of thirty-five, and the thin, darkly dour man of fifty who were with the Contessa in the carriage; and a moment later she had introduced me to the Baron and Baronessa di Nivoli. I echoed the name with some interest. "Have I the pleasure of meeting the inventor of the new air-ship which is so much talked about?" I asked.

"That is my brother Paolo," replied the Baron, unbending slightly.

"He will join us later," added the Baronessa, with a quick look at the pretty and rich little widow which betrayed to me a secret. She then turned a dark, disapproving gaze upon me which told another, and I could have laughed aloud. "They want to nobble my poor little Contessa for brother-aëronaut, and they don't countenance chance meetings with strange young men," I said to myself, greatly amused. "If they can see through the dust, and suspect in me a possible rival for the absent, they have sharp eyes, or keen imaginations, and I may be in for a little fun."

We were at the hotel door, and I was allowed to help the Contessa out, though the elder lady preferred the aid of the concierge. For the moment Gaetà had forgotten the claims of her companions, and remembered only mine. It is a butterfly way

of hers to forget easily, and flutter with delight in a new corner of the garden, just because it is new.

"You are staying here? How nice!" she exclaimed, without giving me time to answer. "We should have arrived last night, but we had an accident to our carriage—a broken wheel. It was coming down from the Hospice of St. Bernard, which we had been to visit—oh, not to please *me,* do not think it. It was the Baron, here. In dim ages his people and the saint were cousins, though the idea of a saint having cousins seems actually sacrilegious, doesn't it? I do not love monks, I only respect them, which is so disagreeable. But the Baron took us. *Dio mio!* I have no warm blood left. It was frozen up there. And then, that our carriage should have broken down at a little place—the wrong end of nowhere—Bourg St. Something! We had to stop all night. Fancy me without my maid, who was to meet me here. I do not know if my dress is not on wrong side before. Later, we all have to go on to Chamounix and then to Aix-les-Bains. I've taken a villa there for a month. You *must* come and see me."

Thus she chattered on as we entered the hotel, and then, suddenly, her bright eyes fell upon the Boy, who had retired near the stairway. There he stood, with a book in his hand, and an unwonted colour in his brown cheeks, glowing red under the strange blue jewels of his eyes.

"What a divine boy!" the Countess half whispered to me, not taking her gaze from him. "He is exactly like a wonderful painting by some old Master of my own dear country. What eyes! They are better and bigger sapphires than any I own, though I've some famous ones. And how strange

they are—looking out of his brown face, from under such black lashes, too. Oh, a picture, certainly. He is not like a modern, every-day boy, at all. He can't be English, of that I'm sure, and yet——"

"He is American," I said, when she paused thoughtfully, the Boy at his distance reading or pretending to read, as he stood. "But you are right. He is very far from being an every-day boy."

"You know him, then?"

"We've been travelling companions for days, and have got to be tremendous pals."

"How old is he?" asked the Contessa, a deep glow of interest and curiosity kindling in her warm brown eyes.

"I don't know. He has talked freely about himself only once or twice, though we've discussed together most other subjects under the sun."

"How deliciously mysterious. Mysterious! yes, that's the word for him. He has mysterious eyes; a mysterious face. There is a shadow upon it. That is part of the fascination, is it not? I am sure he is fascinating."

"Extraordinarily so. I have never met anyone at all like him."

"He might be a boy Tasso. But he has suffered; he is not a child any more, though his face is smooth as mine. He must be eighteen or nineteen?"

"I should give him less, though he has read and thought a tremendous lot for a boy."

"Men are not judges of age, thank heaven. Women are. I *will* have it that your friend is nineteen. I should be too silly to take an interest in him, were he less, if it were not motherly; and that

wouldn't be entertaining. You see, I am already twenty-two."

"You look eighteen," I said; and it was true. Widow as she was, it was not possible to think of the Contessa as a responsible, grown woman.

"I told you that you were no judge of age. I was married at eighteen, a widow at nineteen. *Dio mio!* but it all seems a long time ago, already! Lord Lane, you must introduce to me your friend the boy."

Here was a dilemma, but I got out of it by telling the truth, which is usually, in the end, the best policy, many wise opinions to the contrary notwithstanding. "You will laugh," I said, "but I don't know his name."

"Not possible."

"True, nevertheless, like most things that seem impossible; nor does he know mine, unless he heard you speak it driving up to the hotel. He was at the door."

"Men are extraordinary! But, introduce him. You can manage somehow. It's not his name I care for. It is those eyes. I shall invite him to come and see me in Aix. Please bring him to me now. The Baron is arranging about our rooms, and there is sure to be a misunderstanding of some sort, as we had engaged for last night and did not come. The Baronessa? Oh, never mind; she had better listen to her husband. She is my friend, and is soon to be my guest, but she has got upon my nerves to-day."

Thus bidden, I could do no less than walk away down the hall to where the Boy stood with his book, leaning against the baluster.

"I've done all I could about the bag," I said.

"The people in the post-office seemed hopeful that the big reward would do the trick."

"Thank you. You are very good," he returned. Something in his tone made me look at him closely. There was a change in him, though for my life I could not have told what it was or why it had come; there was ice in his voice, though I had spent nearly two dusty, unwashed hours in his service, while he refreshed himself at leisure.

"I hope it will be all right," I went on, rather heavily. "Look here, that pretty little fairy would like to know you. She's the Contessa di Ravello. Come along and be introduced."

The Boy flung up his head, his blue eyes flashing. "Why am I to be dragged at her chariot wheels?" he demanded.

"Oh, rot, my child. Don't put on airs. Men twice your age would snatch at such a chance."

"I can't tell what I may be capable of when I'm twice my age. It's difficult enough to know myself now. But I know——"

"Come on, do, like the dear Little Old Pal you really are," I cut in. "You don't want to put me in a false position, do you? Besides, I'd like particularly to get your opinion on the Contessa. I may have to ask your advice about something connected with her, later."

This fetched him, though with not too good a grace. "You don't know my name," he said, with a return of impishness, as we walked together towards the Contessa.

"I think that you have the advantage of me in that way, now."

"If you call it an advantage. I had a presentiment you weren't plain mister, so I'm not surprised.

You may tell your Countess that my name is Laurence."

"Christian name or 'Pagan' name?"

"Make the Christian name Roy."

In another moment I was introducing Mr. Roy Laurence to the Contessa di Ravello; and as they stood eyeing each other, the fairy Gaetà pulsing with coquetry through all her hot-blooded Italian veins, the Boy aloof and critical, I was struck with the picture that the two figures made.

The Boy had three or four inches more of height than the Contessa, and looked almost tall beside her, though I had thought of him as small. Her round, dimpled face seemed no older than his oval brown one, in this moment of his gravity, and the haughty air of a young prince which he wore now, consciously or unconsciously, had a certain provoking charm for a spoiled beauty used to conquest. The big blue stars which lit his face expressed a resolve not to yield to any blandishment, and this no doubt piqued Gaetà, before whom all the boys and youths at Davos had gone down like grass before the scythe. Helen Blantock came after she had left the place, otherwise she might have had to fight for her rights as queen; but as it was, she had been without rivals and probably had known few dangerous ones elsewhere. Never had I seen her take as much real pains to be charming to a grown man, as she took with this silent boy, during the few moments that her friends spent in wrestling with the landlord. What lamps she lit in the windows of her eyes, suddenly raising their curtains on dazzling glances! What rosy flags she hung out in his honour, on dimpled cheeks; what rich display of pearls and coral her cupid-mouth gave him! but all in vain, so far as

any change in his cold young face showed. I had seen it warm for a gleam of light on the wing of a swooping bird, or an effect of cloud-shadow on a mountain, as it would not warm for this galaxy of bewitchments, and his quiet civility was but a sharper pin-prick, I should fancy, to a woman's vanity.

The little scene was not long in playing, however. Soon the Baronessa swept to her friend's side, and bore her away, like a large steam-tug making off against wind and tide with a dainty sailing yacht.

Ignoring the subject of the lady, Boy began questioning me about the business of the bag, thanking me again more cordially for what I had done, when I had answered.

"I must have a bath and change now," said I at last. "At what time shall we dine?"

"We? You will be dining with your new friend."

"She's an old friend, if one counts by time of acquaintance, and charming, as you've seen; still, we're rather tired perhaps, and not up to dinner pitch. I'm not sure but we'd get on better alone together, you and I."

"I've taken a private sitting-room, and I'm going to dine there."

"Will you have me with you?"

"If you like."

"It will be a good opportunity to get your advice."

The Boy did not answer; but when we sat at table, and had talked for a while of indifferent things, he said abruptly: "What were you going to ask me?"

"Your advice as to whether it would be well to fall in love with the little Contessa."

"Has she money?"

"Hang it all, do you think I'm the kind of man to want a woman for her money?"

"I've known you about six days."

"Don't hedge. Can't six days tell you as much as six years—such six days as we've had?"

"Yes. It's true. I would stake a good deal that you're not that kind of man. I don't know why I said it. Something hateful made me. The Contessa is very pretty. Could you—fall in love with her?"

"It would be an interesting experiment to try."

"If you think so, you must already have begun."

"No, not yet. I assure you I have an open mind. But it's an odd coincidence meeting her like this. I was making the fact that she has a house at Monte Carlo an excuse for going down there—sooner or later—as an end to my journey. Now, she is to be in Chamounix, and she intends to invite us both, it seems, to visit her in Aix-les-Bains, where she has taken a villa."

The Boy looked at me suddenly, with a slight start. "She is going to Chamounix?"

"So she says."

"And—she will invite you to visit her at her villa in Aix-les-Bains."

"You, too. You said yesterday you wanted to go to Aix, as you had never been; and we planned an expedition by the mule-path up Mont Revard."

"I know. But—but would you visit the Contessa?"

"We might amuse ourselves. She would be well chaperoned, no doubt by the Baronessa. There's a brother of the Baron's in the background. Probably he'll turn up at Aix. Certainly he will if

his relatives have any control over his actions. He's no other, it turns out, than Paolo di Nivoli, the young Italian whose airship invention has been made a fuss about lately. It would be rather a joke to try and cut him out with the Contessa—if one could."

"Oh—cut him out." The Boy seemed thoughtful. "Though you aren't in love with her?"

"Yes."

"I see."

"Will you go if I do—that is, if she really asks us?"

I expected him to flash out a refusal, but he brooded under a deep shadow of eyelashes for a while, looking half cross, half mischievous, and finally said: "I'll think it over."

CHAPTER XVI

A Man from the Dark

"Desperate, proud, fond, sick, . . . rejected by men."
—WALT WHITMAN.

As we drank our *café double,* tap, tap, came at the door; a message from the Contessa di Ravello asking if we would not take coffee with her and her friends in their private sitting-room.

I would have preferred to finish my talk with the Little Pal, which had reached an entertaining point in the announcement that he seemed to know me less well since he had heard my name—that names, and past histories, and circumstances were barriers between lives. But the Boy, reluctant a short time ago to be drawn into the Contessa's society, was now apparently willing to give up the tête-à-tête

We left our coffee, and went to drink the Contessa's, which reached our lips chilled by the silent enmity of her friends. But, whether because their example had been a warning, or because he had suffered a "change, into something new and strange," the Boy was no longer a wet blanket. He did not show the self which I had learned to know in some of its phases, but he was shyly conciliatory with the Contessa, the blue eyes hinting that, if she were persistent, his admiration might be won. Still, he often answered in monosyllables or briefly, when she spoke to him, a smile curving his short

upper lip. I could not understand what his manner meant, nor, I am sure, could she; but she was evidently bent on solving the puzzle.

"Do you play tennis?" she asked him.

"Yes."

"Ah, so do I, and well, too, though I'm not English. Lord Lane will tell you that. And you dance, I know."

"Yes."

"You love it? I do."

"I used to."

"That sounds as if you were a hundred, instead of—nineteen, is it not?"

"I'm not quite ninety-nine."

"I should like to dance with you. We are the right size for each other in the dance, are we not?"

"I'd try not to disappoint you."

"Oh, we must have a dance. You love music, I know. One sees it by your eyes. Once, when I asked Lord Lane if he sang or played, he said that he 'had no drawing-room tricks.' Rude of him, *n'est-ce pas?* But you? Is it that you play?"

"The violin will talk for me, if I coax it."

"Ah, I was sure. We are going to be congenial. But the singing? I see by your face that you sing, though you won't say so. Here is a piano. I will accompany you, if you like, and if we know the same things. Perhaps our voices would be well together."

I was surprised to see the Boy get up and go to the piano. "I will sing if you like; but I accompany myself, always," he said. "I don't sing things that many people know."

For a moment he sat at the piano, as if thinking. Then he, who had never told me that he sang, never even spoken of singing, turned into a young angel,

and gripped my heart with a voice as strangely haunting as his eyes and his little brown face. Had he been a girl, I suppose his voice would have been called a deep contralto. As he was a boy—I do not know how to classify it.

I can say only that, while the mellow music rippled from his parted lips, it seemed as if the gates of Paradise had fallen ajar. He sang an old ballad that I had never heard. It was all about "Douglas Gordon," whose story flowed with the tide of a plaintive accompaniment which I think he must have arranged himself: for somehow, it was like him. All the sadness, all the sweetness in this sweet, sad, old world seemed concentrated in the Boy's angel voice, and listening, I was Douglas Gordon, and he was putting my life-sorrow into words. He took my heart and broke it, yet I would not have had him stop. Then, suddenly, he did stop, and the Contessa was in tears. "Bravo! bravo!" she cried, diamonds raining over two spasmodic dimples. "Again; something else."

He sang Christina Rossetti's "Perchance you may remember, perchance you may forget," and the thrill of it was in the marrow of my bones. I had scarcely known before what music could do with me, and the voice of the little Gaetà, following the song, jarred on my ears as she praised the Boy, and pleaded for more.

"I can't sing again to-night," said he. "I'm sorry, but I can sing only when I feel in the mood."

"But you will come with Lord Lane, and stay at my villa, which I have taken at Aix—yes, if only for a few days? The Baron and Baronessa will be with me, too. You are going that way. Lord Lane has told me. Will you come?"

"Is he coming?"

"Lord Lane, tell him that you are."

"You are very good, Contessa——"

"There! You hear, it is settled."

"If—Lord Lane makes you a visit, I will also, as you are kind enough to want me."

Afterwards, when we had bidden the Contessa and her guardian dragons good-night, and it was arranged that we were to stay over to-morrow, on account of the lost bag, I said to the Boy on the way upstairs, "You've made a conquest of the Contessa."

He blushed furiously, looked angry, and then burst out laughing. "Are you jealous?" he asked.

"I ought to be."

"But are you?"

"I haven't had time to analyse my emotions. Why did you never tell me you sang?"

"I wasn't ready—till to-night. Now—I sang for you."

"I thought it was for the Contessa."

"Did you? Well"—with sudden crossness—"you may go on thinking so, if you like. Can she sing?"

"Rather well."

"As—better than I can?"

"You must judge for yourself when you hear her."

"You might tell me. But no! I don't want you to, now. It's spoiled. Good-night."

"Good-night. Dream of your conquest."

"Probably she's only trying to—to bring you to the point, by being nice to me. I wonder if you care?"

I would not give the little wretch any satisfaction.

I merely laughed, and an odd blue light flashed in his eyes. He was making up his mind to something, for the life of me I could not tell what.

The Contessa and her satellites should have gone on to Chamounix next day, but Gaetà frankly announced her intention of waiting, so that we might make the journey together. They were driving over the Tête Noire, and we would go afoot, to be sure; still, said she, we could keep more or less together, exchanging impressions from time to time, and lunching at the same place. She made me promise, as a reward to her for this delay, that the Boy and I would not take the way of the Col de Balme, by which no carriage could pass. If we did this, our party and hers must part company early in the day, and she would be left to the tender mercies of the Baron and Baronessa for many a *triste* hour.

"But why should you be imposed upon by them, if they don't amuse you?" I ventured to ask; for Gaetà was so frank about her affairs that one was sometimes led inadvertently to take liberties.

"Oh, it was the brother who amused me, and he amuses me still," replied she, with a *moue,* and a shrug of her pretty shoulders. "At least, I don't *think* I shall be tired of him, when I see him again. He is a whirlwind; he carries a woman off her feet, before she knows what is happening, and we like that in a man, we Italians. We adore temperament. I was nice to the Baron and Baronessa for Paolo's sake. He had to go away from Milan, which is my real home, you know—(if I have a home anywhere) —to have a medal for his air-ship, and many honours and dinners given him in Paris; so, without stopping to think, I invited the Baron and Baronessa to visit me in Aix. Then they suggested

that we should have a little tour first; and we are having it—*Dio mio,* so much the worse for me, till I met you! And now they make me feel like a naughty child."

"Will Paolo come also to the villa?" I asked, smiling.

"He has engagements to last a fortnight still. Perhaps afterwards he may run out to Aix."

The Boy's face fell when I told him that I had promised the Contessa to walk along the highroad, over the Tête Noire.

"Innocentina and I——" he began. Then his eyes wandered to Gaetà, who stood with her friends at the other end of the nall. She was looking extremely pretty, and chose that instant to throw a quick glance at me, demanding sympathy for some *ennui* or other caused by the Baronessa. "Oh, very well," he finished, "it doesn't matter."

He was in suspense all day about his mysteriously important bag. Though handbills had been hastily printed and scattered over the country, there was no certainty as to when we should hear or whether we should hear at all. Late in the evening, however, as we were finishing dinner in the *salle-à-manger,* at the same table with Gaetà and her friends, a message came that a man desired to see the young monsieur who had advertised for a lost bag.

The Boy excused himself, and jumped up. I should have liked to go with him, but courtesy to the ladies forbade, and I sat still, feeling guilty of disloyalty somehow, nevertheless, because of a look he threw me. It seemed to say, "We were such friends, but a woman has come between. My affairs are nothing to you now."

I had thought that he would be back in time for

coffee, but he did not appear, and the curiosity of Gaetà, who had been restless since the Boy's departure, could no longer be kept within bounds. "Do go and see if he has got that wonderful bag," she said. "He might come to tell us!"

I obeyed, nothing loth, but only to learn from the concierge that the young gentleman had gone away with the man who had called.

"Did he leave no message?" I asked.

"No, Monsieur. He talked with the man here in the hall for a few minutes; then he ran upstairs and soon came down again with a cap and coat. Immediately after, he and the man went out together."

"What sort of man was he?"

"An Italian, Monsieur; a very rough-looking peasant-fellow of middle age, poorly dressed in his working clothes. I have never seen him before."

I did not like this description, nor the news the concierge had given. It was nine o'clock, and very dark, for it had begun to rain towards evening, and a monotonous drip, drip mingled with the plash of the fountain in the garden. Grim fancies came knocking at the door of my brain. It was a mad thing for a boy, little more than a child, to go out alone in the night with a stranger, a "rough-looking peasant-fellow," who pretended to know something of the vanished bag; to go out, leaving no word of his intentions, nor the direction he would take. As like as not, the man was a villain who scented rich prey in a tourist offering a reward of five thousand francs for a lost piece of luggage.

As I thought of the brave, innocent little comrade walking unsuspectingly into some trap from which I

could have saved him had I been by his side, a sensation of physical sickness came over me.

"How long is it since they went out?" I asked quickly.

"Ten minutes, at most, Monsieur."

I could have shaken the concierge's hand for this good news, for there was hope of catching them up. I was in dinner jacket and pumps, but I did not wait to make a dash upstairs for hat or coat. I borrowed the blue, gold-banded cap of the concierge, not caring two pence for my comical appearance, which would have sent Gaetà into peals of silver laughter, and out into the rain I went, turning up the collar of my jacket.

I had forgotten the Contessa, and my promise to return immediately with tidings from the front. All I thought of was, which direction should I take to find the Boy. Ought I to turn towards the town or away from it?

Before I reached the garden gate, not many metres from the door, I had decided to try the town way; and lest I should be doing the wrong thing and have to rectify my mistake later, I ran as a lamplighter is popularly supposed to run, but doesn't and never did.

The Boy and his companion would be walking, and, if I were on the right track, I was almost sure to catch them up sooner or later at this pace, before they could reach the town and turn off into some side street.

I had not been galloping along through the fresh, grey mud for three hundred metres when I saw two figures moving slowly a few paces ahead. One was small and slender, the other of middle height and strongly built.

"Boy, is that you?" I shouted.

The slim figure turned, and I mumbled a "Thank goodness!"

"Little wretch!" I exclaimed heartily, as I joined the couple ahead. "How could you go off alone like this with a stranger, perhaps a ruffian (he looks it), without leaving any word for me? You deserve to be shaken."

"You wouldn't say he looked a ruffian, if you could see his face. I'm sure he's honest. And as for sending word, I didn't care to disturb you and—your Contessa."

"Hang the—no, of course, I don't mean that. Luckily I was in time to catch you, and——"

"Did the Contessa send you after me, or did——"

"She doesn't know what's become of you. There was no time for politenesses. You gave me some bad moments, little brute. Now, tell me what you're about."

He explained that the peasant (who understood no word of English) was an Italian who had come to Martigny to find work as a road mender, that he had been taken ill and lost his job; that he had tramped back over the St. Bernard to Aosta, near which place he had once lived; that the work he had heard of there was already given to another; and that, walking back to rejoin his family near Martigny, he had found the bag on the Pass. He had brought it home, and had only just learned the address of the owner, as set forth in the handbills.

"Why didn't he bring the bag to you, and claim the reward?" I asked.

"It is at the house of the priest, and the priest has been away all day, visiting a relative in the country somewhere, who is ill, so this man, Andriolo Stefani,

couldn't get the bag. But he came to tell me that it was found, and where it was."

"And he pretends to be guiding you to the house of the priest now?"

"No. I'm going to his house—or rather, the room where he and his wife and children live."

"For goodness' sake, why?"

"Because he's refused to accept the reward for finding the bag."

"By Jove, he must have some deep game. What reason did he give, and what excuse did he make, for dragging you off to his lair? It sounds as if he meant to try and kidnap you for a ransom—(these things do happen, you know)—and there are probably others in it besides himself. I don't believe in the priest, nor the wife and children, nor even in his having found the bag."

"He didn't ask me to go to his house. When I spoke of the reward, he said that he couldn't take it, and though I questioned him, would not tell me why, but was evidently distressed and unhappy. Finally he admitted that it was his wife who would not allow him to accept a reward. She had made him promise that he wouldn't. Then I said that I'd like to talk to her, and might I go with him to his house. He tried to make excuses; he had no house, only one room, not fit for me to visit; and the place was a long way off, outside Martigny Bourg; but I insisted, so at last he gave in. Now, do you still think he's the leader of a band of kidnappers?"

"I don't know what to think. There's evidently something queer. I'll talk to him."

During our hurried conversation, the man had walked on a few steps in advance. I called him

back, speaking in Italian. He came at once, and now that we were in the town, where here and there a blur of light made darkness visible, I could see his face distinctly. I had to confess to myself at first glance that it was not the face of a cunning villain,—this worn, weather-beaten countenance, with its hollowed cheeks, and the sad dark eyes, out of which seemed to look all the sorrows of the world.

He had found the bag night before last, he said, between the Cantine de Proz and Bourg St. Pierre. It had been lying in the road, in the *rücksack,* and he judged by the strap that it had been attached to the back of a man, or a mule. While I questioned him further, trying to get some details of description not given in the handbills, he paused. "There is the priest's house," he said. "There is a light in the window now. Perhaps he has come back."

"We will stop and ask for the bag," said I, watching the face of the man. It did not blench, and I began to wonder if, after all, he might not be honest.

The priest, a delightful, white-haired old fellow, himself of the peasant class, had returned, and from a locked cupboard in his bare little dining-room study produced the much talked of bag, in its *rücksack.*

The Boy sprang at it eagerly. So secure had he believed it to be on the grey donkey's back, that he had not been in the habit of taking out the key. It was still in the lock, and, the bag standing on the priest's dinner table, the Boy opened it with visible excitement. Then he dived down into the contents, without bringing them into sight, and a bright colour flamed in his cheeks. "Everything is safe," he said, with a long sigh of relief. "I'm thankful."

He turned to the priest, speaking in French—and

his French was very good. "I have offered a large reward to the finder of this bag. But the man will not have it. Can you tell me why, *mon père?*"

"I cannot tell you, Monsieur. Doubtless he has a reason which seems to him good," answered the priest, who evidently knew that reason, but was pledged not to tell. "He and his family have not been in my parish long, but I believe them to be worthy people. I have been trying to get work for Andriolo, since he has been well again, and able to undertake it, but so far I have not been fortunate."

The Boy took a handful of gold from his pocket. "For the poor of your parish, *mon père,* if you will be good enough to accept it for them," said he, with great charm and simplicity of manner. The old priest flushed with pleasure, saying that he had many poor, and was constantly distressed because he could do so little. This would be a Godsend. I glanced at the Italian, and saw that his weary, dark eyes were fixed with a passionate wistfulness upon the gold. This look, his whole appearance, bespoke poverty, yet he had deliberately refused five thousand francs, a fortune to most men of his condition. Now that he was vouched for by the priest, extreme curiosity took the place of suspicion in my mind.

I hid the blue cap of the concierge behind my back, in the priest's house, but the Boy saw it, and saw that I was drenched with rain. I must have been a figure for laughter, but he did not laugh. "You see, I was in a hurry," I excused myself, under a long, comprehending gaze of his. "It's your fault if I look an ass."

"You didn't stop even to go and get a hat," he

said. "You came out in the rain just as you were, and you ran—I heard you running, behind me. But—but of course it's because you're kind-hearted. You would have done just the same for anybody. For—the Contessa——"

"Not for the Baronessa, anyhow," said I. "I should have stopped for a mackintosh and even goloshes, had her safety been hanging in the balance."

Then we both laughed, and Stefani, who by this time was showing us the way through the rain to his own home, looked over his shoulder, surprised and self-conscious, as if he feared that we were laughing at him.

On the outskirts of straggling Martigny Bourg, he stopped before a gloomy, grey stone house with four rows of closed wooden shutters, which meant four floors of packed humanity. Even Martigny has its tenements for poor workers, or those who would be workers if they could, and this was one of them.

We followed Andriolo Stefani up four flights of narrow stone stairs, picking our way by testing each step with a cautious foot, since light there was none. Arrived at the top floor, we groped along a passage to the back of the house, and our guide opened a door. There was a yellow haze, which meant one candle-flame fighting for its life in the dark, and we waited outside, while the Italian spoke for a moment to someone we could not see. There came a note of protest in a woman's voice, but the man's beat it down with some argument, and then Stefani returned to ask us in.

Two women sat in a room almost bare of furniture, and both tried to rise on our entrance; but

one, who was young as years go, had her lap full of little worn shoes, and the other, who looked older than the allotted span, was nursing a wailing baby, half undressed.

I found myself strangely embarrassed with the coarse guilt of intrusion. I was suddenly oppressed with self-conscious awkwardness, wishing myself anywhere else, and not knowing what to do or say. In all probability I looked haughty and disagreeable, though I felt humble as a worm. How the Boy felt I have no means of knowing; I can only tell how he acted. One would have thought that he had known these poor people all his life. I lingered near the door, taking notes of the sad picture; the two rough wooden boxes, in which slept three little dark children, all apparently of exactly the same size; the mattress on the floor near by for the parents; the open door leading into a dark garret, where, no doubt, the grandmother crept to sleep; the shelves on the wall, bare save for a few dishes of peasant-made pottery; the pile of dried mud on the tiled floor, which the young mother had been carefully scraping with a knife from the little worn boots in her lap; the rickety, uncovered table, with a bunch of endives on a plate, and a candle guttering in a bottle. This was the picture, redeemed from squalor only by the lithograph of the Virgin on the wall, draped with fresh wild flowers, and its perfect cleanliness; this was the home of the supposed "kidnapper," the man who had refused to accept five thousand francs as a reward.

While I stood, stiff and uncomfortable, the Boy went forward quickly, begging the two women not to rise. "Poor, dear little baby!" he said in Italian,

looking down at the dark scrap of humanity in the grandmother's arms. "She is ill, isn't she?"

Now, how did he know that the creature was a "she"? If it were a guess, it was a lucky one, for both women replied together that the little girl had been ailing since yesterday. They could not tell what was the matter. They had hoped that she would be better to-day, but instead, she seemed worse; and with this, a glittering film which had been overspreading the mother's eyes, suddenly dissolved into silently falling rain. There were no sobs, no gaspings from this tired woman, too used to sorrow to rail against it, yet it was plain to see that her heart was breaking. Still, life must go on; and so, while she grieved for a little one she feared to lose, she cleaned the boots of those she hoped to keep.

"Have you called a doctor for her?" asked the Boy.

"The good priest is half a doctor. He came to see the *bambina*."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, Signor, we cannot give her all the things he said she should have, nor can he help us to them, for he has much to do for others, and little to do it with."

"Yet you would not let your husband take the reward I offered for finding my bag. He is out of work, and you are poor; you have four children to feed, and one of them is ill. Why will you not have the money? I have come to ask you that. You see, I *want* you to have it, for the bag is worth all I've offered and even more to me."

"Ah, Signor, how can I tell you? It was to save my baby I refused."

"Please tell. You need not mind saying anything to me—or to my friend. We are interested and want to help you."

Now the young woman's tears were falling fast, but silently still, as if she knew that her heart-break was unimportant in the great scheme of things, and she wished to make no noise about it. Her lips moved, but no words came.

"She will not speak against me," Stefani said suddenly, "nor will my poor mother. But I will tell you the story. I meant to steal your bag, and sell the gold things and all the valuables that were in it. It was a great temptation, for we had scarce a penny left, and there was no work anywhere. I was tired, tired all through to my heart, Signor, that night on the Pass, and then I found the bag. I brought it home, and charged Emilia and my mother to say nothing to anyone outside. The children were at school, so they did not see, or they might have lisped out something, and set people talking. The two women begged me to give up the bag, and try for a reward in case one should be offered, but I was desperate. I said that the gold was worth more than anything that would be offered—the gold, and some jewelry in a little box. I knew a man who would buy of me, and I had gone out to find him yesterday, when, as if Heaven had sent a curse upon us for my sin, the *bambina* was struck down with this illness—a terrible aching of her little head, and a fever. When I came home to take away the things out of the bag, my wife begged me on her knees, for the child's sake, to change my mind; and at last I did, for who can hold out against the prayers of those he loves?

"Quickly, lest I should repent, I carried the bag

to our priest, and told him all. He thought as a penance for the sin which had been in my heart, I should take no reward if it were offered, though he did not lay this upon me as a command. Emilia was with him, for, said she, Our Lady will save the baby if we make this great sacrifice. Now you know all the truth."

"And I know that you are good people—better than I would have been in your places—better than anyone I know. There's no credit in keeping straight if one's not tempted to go wrong, is there? I won't offend you by begging that you'll take the reward. I offer you no reward, but I am going to give your children a present, and you are to use it for the comfort of your family. I have enough with me, because, you see, I had to get something ready to-day, in case the reward had to be paid. Now, it isn't needed for that, so I can use it in this other way. And you have done all that is right, and you would hurt me very much if you refused to let me do what I wish. It is always wrong to hurt people, you know. And you must send me word early to-morrow morning before I go, whether the baby is better. I feel sure, somehow, that she will be."

Then a roll of notes was thrust into one of the little boots, still caked with mud, which the mother kept mechanically in her hand. There was a pat on the shoulder, too, and an instant later the Boy's arm was hooked into mine; I was whisked away with him in as rapid a flight as if he had been a thief, and not a benefactor.

"How much did you give them, young Santa Claus?" I asked, when he had me out in the rain again.

"About one thousand three hundred dollars. I can't stop to calculate it for you in pounds or francs. I'm too excited. Oh, how wet you are, poor Man! And all for me! But wasn't it splendid! And I just know that baby 'll be better to-morrow. You see if she isn't."

She was. The news was brought to us early in the morning by a poor man half out of his wits with joy and gratitude.

CHAPTER XVII

The Little Game of Flirtation

"To take your lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave them behind you."

—Walt Whitman.

The Contessa had to be pacified, but she adored romance, and she was pleased to say that the story of the bag, lost and found, which I—not the Boy—told her, came under that category. She was in the best of tempers for a day of travelling, and saw us off, before her friends were dressed and ready to begin their drive to Chamounix.

"They are taking as long as they can, on purpose," she whispered to me, with the air of a naughty child planning mischief behind the backs of its elders. "Anything to keep me to themselves and away from you! But you are walking, and the way is uphill for a very long time, so the hotel people say. We shall catch you up, and just to spite the Di Nivolis, if nothing more, I shall beg first one of you, then the other, to let me give you a lift. Neither of you must refuse, or I shall cry, and no man has ever made me cry yet."

"I'm sure no man ever will," I answered promptly.

"And no boy?" she asked, with a long-lashed glance at my companion, who had given no answer save a smile.

"I wonder how you would look when you cried,

Contessa?" was the only reply the little wretch deigned, but instead of offending, it appeared to amuse her. She watched our cavalcade out of the hotel garden (the *rücksack* once more on Souris' faithless back), and the silver bells of her laughter lightly rang us down the road.

Again we had to pass through Martigny Bourg, and presently, turning aside from the road which had led me to the Grand St. Bernard, we took the way on the right, almost at once feeling the rise of the hill. Steeper and steeper it grew, and warmer and warmer we, though the day was young. Often we were glad of the excuse the view gave us to stop and look back, down into the wide bowl of the Rhone Valley, with a heat-haze of quivering blue, creating an effect of great distance, like a "gauze drop" on the stage.

Surely this was the longest hill on earth, and when we reached the top—if we ever did—we should find that we had been climbing Jack's Beanstalk, coming out into a different world! Up and up we dragged for hours, the Boy determined not to take to donkey-back, despite the protestations of Innocentina, emphatic, but slightly modified by constant association with the man she was engaged in converting.

Sometimes we were ministered to by small maidens, with marvellously neat, sleek hair, who sprang up under our eyes, apparently from rabbit-holes, their arms hooked into the handles of big fruit baskets which might easily have been their bath-tubs or cradles. If we seemed inclined to turn away with an expressionless gaze, the little creatures forged after us with a determined trot, laid back with tiny brown hands the dainty white napkin

hiding the basket's contents, and tempted us with purple plums or mellow pears. In the end, we invariably succumbed to these wiles, even when we had sickened at the thought of fruit, and were obliged surreptitiously to hide our purchases by the wayside, when the sturdy young vendors' backs were turned.

We carried our panamas in our hands, and the Boy's short chestnut curls clung to his forehead in damp rings, making him look absurdly childish. I wondered at myself for discussing with eager interest, as I often did, so many of life's unanswerable questions with such a slip of boyhood. Still, I knew that I should often do it again, while we remained together, and that he would know how to measure wits with mine, to my disadvantage, compelling always my respect for his opinions, unless he happened to be in an inconsequential or impish mood.

After a long climb, we called a halt at the most attractive of several little wayside châlets we had passed. Each was thoughtfully provided with an awning or wooden roof stretching across the road to give shade to travellers, who were lured to pause by bottles of bright-coloured syrups, wine, and beer displayed on flower-decked tables. Our chosen châlet made a specialty of milk, and a view. There was a rough balcony at the back, built over a sheer precipice, and far beneath, the Rhone Valley spread itself for our eyes. We sat resting, with glasses of rich yellow milk in our hands, when a voice under the road-shelter in front roused us from reverie. It was the Contessa greeting Joseph and Innocentina, who were reposing on a bench in the delicious shade.

"I was just thinking it was rather queer they hadn't caught us up," I said, rising; and then I asked myself why I had said it; for, when I came to cross-question my own thoughts, they had to own up that the Contessa had not been in them.

"Oh, it was the Contessa you were thinking of, then, when you sat looking as if you were a thousand miles away, and had left your body behind to keep your place?" said the Boy, jumping up quickly. "Well, here she is; your mind may be at ease."

We returned to the front of the house, through the neat, bare "living-room," the Boy a step or two ahead of me, as if anxious to greet the new arrivals. Off came his hat, and he stood leaning against the carriage, looking up into the warm brown eyes of Gaetà, which were warmer and brighter than ever because of this sudden show of devotion.

Had the magnetism of her coquetry fired him? I wondered. It would be strange if it were not so, for she was beautiful, and her manner flattering to a boy so young. Somehow, my spirits were dashed at the thought that my companion's last words to me might be explained by jealousy of an older man with a pretty woman. It would be hard if it were to come to this between us. Though I had talked of going to see her in Monte Carlo, the butterfly Contessa was no more to me than a delicate pastel on someone else's wall, or a gay refrain, which charms the ear without haunting the memory. I would not interfere with the Boy; if he chose to encourage Gaetà to flirt with him, he need not fear me; but I had liked to think he valued my comradeship. Now, a fancy for this child-woman would rob me of him. Instead of being piqued by the Contessa's growing preference for the Boy, as I

ought to have been by all the rules of the game of flirtation, I was conscious of anger against her as an intruder.

This feeling increased almost to sulkiness when the Boy was invited to take a seat in the carriage beside the gloomy Baron, and accepted promptly.

The driving party had been delayed a long time in starting, Gaetà explained, making large eyes which blamed her friends for everything; and the driver had brought his horses slowly, oh, so slowly, up the long hill, the stupid fellow. But now the carriage flashed ahead, and I was left to tramp on alone, while the Contessa and the Boy flirted, and Joseph and Innocentina bickered, all alike unmindful of me.

We lunched at the Col de Forclaz, where the hill, tired of going up, ran down to another valley. There was a godlike assemblage of mountains, white and blue, mountains as far as the eye could reach, and I had a thought or two which I would have liked to exchange for some of the Boy's. But if he had ever really had any thoughts, save for the fun of the moment, he had the air of forgetting them all for Gaetà. When, in a tone of unenthusiastic politeness, she asked if I would not take my friend's place in the carriage for a while when we started on again, out of pure spite against the little wretch who had dropped me for her I said that I would.

I could not see the Boy's face, to make sure if he were disappointed, but I hoped it. As for myself, I would fain have walked. In a scene of such exalted beauty, Gaetà's little quips and quirks struck a wrong note. Sitting with my back to the horses, I could see the Boy walking on behind, his face

"SITTING WITH MY BACK TO THE HORSES".

raised mountain-ward and sky-ward, and I longed to know of what he was thinking, for evidently he had left his aggravating, "awfully-jolly-don't-you-know" mood in the carriage with the Contessa.

The Baron and his wife disputed volubly about the date of one of Paolo's grand dinners in Paris; Gaetà yawned, and I was stricken with dumbness. I could think of nothing to say which she would think worth hearing. Soon, the tremendously steep descent into the valley gave me the best of excuses to jump down and relieve the horses, which the coachman was leading. Somehow, I don't quite know how, I fell back a good distance behind the carriage, and then I found myself so near the Boy, who had been slowly following, that it would have been rude not to join him. After all, we had no quarrel, yet oddly enough we could not take up the thread of our intercourse exactly where it had been broken off. There seemed to be a knot or a tangle in it, which would have to be smoothed out.

It was a wholly irrelevant incident which untied the knot, and left us as we had been, though there was no reason for it but a laugh which we had together.

The thing came about in this wise. We arrived at a small hotel which boasted a garden, and was famous as a view-point. From the door a carriage containing a man was about to drive away. The man was approaching middle age, and had an air of quiet self-reliance which redeemed him from insignificance. He was plainly dressed, in clothes which were not new, and altogether he did not appear to be a personage who, from the hotel-keeper's point of view, would be of supreme importance. Yet the landlord and another besieged the quiet man

with compliments and pleadings, to which he did not seem inclined to listen. Bowing gravely, he told his coachman to drive on, and in a moment had passed us as we stood in the road.

But when he had gone, the landlord and his assistant still had no eyes for us. "Mark my words," exclaimed the former, in a tone of anguish, "we shall lose our star."

Were they astrologers, that they should fear this fate?

Our curiosity was excited, and seeing a head-waiterly person, who wore a mien between awe and stifled amusement, I called for beer which I did not wish to drink. It was served on a table in the shady garden, and I enquired if the carriage just out of sight had contained a troublesome guest.

"Troublesome is not the word, Monsieur," replied the waiter. "But a thing has happened. That gentleman whom you saw, arrived a few days ago, giving the name of Karl. He took the cheapest room in the house; he drank one of the cheapest wines, having satisfied himself that the price was within his means. To-day, he said that he was leaving, and asked for his bill. When it was made out, the wine came to a franc more than he thought it ought. 'I do not complain,' said he to our *patron;* 'if that is the price of the wine, I will pay, but I was told at the table it was less. I do not consider the wine good enough for the price.' This vexed the *patron*, because one does not think the more of a person who haggles over a franc, especially if that person has studied cheapness in all ways during his visit. Perhaps the *patron* spoke somewhat irritably, for he did not care whether the monsieur ever came back to his house or not. Then

the monsieur paid the bill, without another word, and was going away, when a German gentleman, who had been sitting here in the garden, said to the *patron:* 'Do you know who that is?' 'No,' replied our *patron,* 'I do not know, nor do I care.' 'It is Baedeker,' said the gentleman. This was terrible; and the patron flew to correct the little mistake about the wine, with a thousand apologies; but the monsieur would not have his money back, and you saw him drive away. Now, it is possible that our hotel will no longer keep its star, and that would be no less than a catastrophe."

Evidently, what his cherished peacock-feather is to a Chinese mandarin, that is a Baedeker star to a hotel-keeper; and the Boy and I were so tickled at the little tragi-comedy that we forgot, as we walked on side by side, that we had been upon official terms only.

Again we were struck by the extraordinary individuality which differentiates one valley or mountain-pass from another. We had seen nothing like this; nothing, perhaps, so purely beautiful. One could not imagine that winter snow and ice could still the pulse of summer here. It was as if we wandered from one green glade to another in fairy-land, where all the little people who owned the magic land had turned themselves hurriedly into strangely delicate ferns and bluebells to watch us, laughing, as we went by.

The village of Trient lay in deep shadow when we reached it, and found the others waiting for us in the carriage in front of the chief hotel; but there was no gloom in the shadow; it was only a deeper shade of green, with a hint of transparent blue streaked across it. Another remote, dream-village

on the long list of places where I really *must* stay for a lazy summer month—when I have time! The list was growing long now, almost worryingly long, and the Boy felt it so, too, for he also had a list, and strange to say, it was much the same as mine.

We had tea, and were vaguely surprised to see a number of people of our own kind, most of them English and American, engaged in the same occupation, and evidently at home in the place. Trient was on their list as well as ours, and now, if they liked, they could cross it off, and begin with the next place.

The Contessa thought the Boy looked tired, and urged him to drive again, but though his manner was still flirtatious he found an excuse to keep to his feet. He was not really tired, not a bit; how could one be tired in so much beauty? The poor horses were fagged though, for the carriage was heavy; he would not add to its weight.

"You *are* getting rather white about the gills," I said to him when the driving party had once more left us behind. "Why didn't you take up your flirtation where you left it off, like a serial story to be 'continued in your next'? Your weight is nothing."

"It wasn't that, really," replied the Boy.

"What, then?"

"Do you remember why I wanted to come over the Tête Noire?"

"To have the sensation of Mont Blanc suddenly bursting upon you."

"Well, I—to tell the truth, I had a whim—just a whim, and nothing more—to be with you and not with the Contessa when the time for that sensation should come."

My heart warmed; but perhaps I was flattering myself unduly. "You were afraid that her fascinations might overpower those of Mont Blanc, I suppose, whereas I am a mere stock or stone?"

"That's one way of putting it," replied he calmly.

But when the sensation did come, he caught my arm, with a quick-drawn breath, and no word following.

Our worship of other mountains had been a serving of false gods. There was the one White Truth, dwarfing all else into insignificance; not a mere mountain, but a world of snow sailing moonlike in full sky. It was, indeed, as if the moon, gleaming white and bathed in radiance, had come to pay Earth a visit. Surely it would not stay; surely it was a secret that she had come, and we had found it out, just when this great dark rock-door through which we looked, opened by accident to show the sight. But if it were a secret, there was no fear that we would ever tell it, for it soared beyond words.

The first glimpse gave this impression; afterwards we could not have recalled it if we had tried. We grew used to the white Majesty which faced us, by-and-bye, as alas! one does grow used to beauty while one has it within reach of the eye. But just as the Boy had begun to confess himself tired, and to lag in his walk, resting an arm on my shoulder, a new wonder came, like a draught of tonic wine. Sunset, with King Midas' touch, transformed the whole mountain to gold, so that it burned like a lamp to light the world, against a violet sky. In the foreground was a low rampart of green mountain, down which poured a huge glacier like an arrested cataract. It glimmered with a faint ra-

diance, greenish-blue, and pale as the gleam of a glow-worm. The violet of the sky deepened to amethyst-purple, and the snow on the waving line of mountains turned from gold to pink, as if there had been a sudden rain of rose leaves.

For a long time lasted the changing play of jewelled lights, and then the magic colour was swallowed at a gulp by the descending night.

Far away, and far down in the deep valley, the lights of Chamounix and its satellite villages sparkled like a troupe of fallen stars. They lay in a bright heap, clustered together; and Innocentina, coming up with us at this moment, said that they were like raisins sunk together at the bottom of a pudding. The late rain had set all the little torrents talking, and we were silent, listening to their gossip of the mountains' secrets.

CHAPTER XVIII

Rank Tyranny

"Thou art past the tyrant's stroke."
—SHAKESPEARE.

WE seemed to have formed a habit, the Boy and I, of steering always for a Hôtel Mont Blanc, if there were one in a town; so that now we had come to look upon a hostelry with such a name as a sort of second home, a daughter of a mother house. There were still two other reasons why we should select the Mont Blanc in Chamounix: the first, because the Contessa was going there and had asked us to do likewise; the second, because at Martigny we had seen an advertisement of the hotel which stated that it was situated in a "*vaste parc avec chamois.*"

Our imagination pictured an ancient château, altered for modern uses, shut away from the outer world in a mysterious forest of dark pines, where wild chamois sported gracefully at will, leaping across chasms from one overhanging rock to another.

It was long past twilight when our little procession of four human beings and three beasts of burden straggled through a lighted gateway which we had been told to enter for the Hôtel Mont Blanc. With one blow our ancient castle was shattered. At a hundred metres distant from the street rose an enormous modern hotel, blazing with light at every window. Where was the vast park with its crowding pines

and its ravines for the wild chamois? It must be somewhere, since the advertisement certified its existence, and so must the chamois. Perhaps the forest lay behind the hotel; but the Boy was too tired to care, and to us both baths, food, and rest were for the moment worth more than parks or chamois. The hotel struck a high note of civilisation, and I had seen nothing so fine since London or Paris. The Boy and I dined late and sumptuously, tête-à-tête, for the hot sun and the long drive had sent Gaetà to bed, chastened with a headache; and, weary as he was, the Little Pal had pluck enough left to suggest an appointment for early next morning. "I shall want to know how Mont Blanc looks from my window, so I won't waste my time in bed," said he. "Besides, I'm rather keen to see the chamois, aren't you? The only one I've ever met was stuffed, and rather moth-eaten. He was in a dime museum in New York."

I was up at half-past six next day, and at my window, where Mont Blanc in early sunshine smote me in the face with its nearness. A sudden longing took me, as the longing for a great white lamp takes a moth, to fly at it, or, in other words, to get myself to the top. I had never "done" any Swiss ascents, though I knew almost every peak and pinnacle of rock in Cumberland and Wales, and it seemed to me that I should be a muff to miss the chance of such a climb as this. By the time I had dressed, the thing was decided. I would see about guides, and try to arrange at once for the ascent.

The thought had joy in it, and I ran downstairs, whistling the "Alpine Maid." The Boy and I had settled overnight that we would drink our morning coffee and eat our rolls together, at a quarter to eight, long before the Contessa or her friends had opened

their eyes; but the appointed time was not yet come, and I had it in mind to make enquiries concerning my excursion, when I almost stumbled against the Boy, coming in at the front door.

"I've been out in the park," said he, when we had exchanged by way of greeting a "Hello, Boy" and "Hello, Man."

"Meet any chamois?"

"Yes."

"Honour bright? An inspection of the park from my window led me to fear that they must be an engaging myth. There's a fine big garden, with a lot of trees in it, but as for rocks or chamois——"

"There are both. Come out and I'll show you."

I went, walking beside the Boy along one well-kept path after another, until suddenly the bubble delusion broke. In a cage stood or sat, in various attitudes of bored dejection, five melancholy little animals with horns, and singularly large, prominent eyes. Their aspect begged pardon for their degradation, as they turned their backs with weak scorn upon a toy rock in the centre of their prison. "We have reason to believe that we are well connected," they seemed to bleat, "because there is an ancient legend in our household that we are chamois, but you must not judge the family by us."

"I believe," said the Boy pitifully, "they've degenerated so far now, that, if one gave them Mont Blanc to bound upon, they wouldn't know what to do with it."

"*I* would, however," said I, full of my project, "and I'm thinking of trying."

"What do you mean?" asked the Boy, looking rather startled.

"Let's have breakfast out of doors on a little table under the trees, and I'll tell you. Here's one in the shade, and away from the—er—a certain chamois-ness in the air." I pulled up chairs, and raised my hand to a hovering waiter. "What I mean to say is," I went on, "that I'm going to make the ascent as soon as I can arrange it. You won't mind waiting for me a couple of days, will you?—or, of course, you can travel with the Contessa if you like. No doubt she would be delighted to have you."

"You're going up—Mont Blanc?"

"I am, my Kid."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because—you might be killed."

"Good heavens, one would think I was Icarus, going a pair of wax wings on to my shoulder-blades for a flight into ether. I'm not exactly a novice at the game, you know, though I haven't done any snow-climbing. Why, you little donkey, you look pale. What's the matter with you?"

"Do you know what happened this morning—or rather last night?" the Boy replied to my question with another. "Did any of the hotel people tell you?"

"No. Don't be mysterious before breakfast. It isn't good for the digestion."

"Don't joke. I wasn't going to say anything about it till afterwards, in case you hadn't heard; but now I will. The *femme de chambre* told me. The news has just come that a young guide has died of exhaustion on the mountain, between the Observatory and the Grands Mulets. Two others who were with him had to leave him lying dead, after dragging the body down a long way."

At this inappropriate moment, our coffee, rolls, and honey were set before us, and the waiter, being an accomplished linguist, like most of his singularly gifted and enterprising kind, had heard and understood the last sentence. Bursting with gruesome information, he could not resist lightening himself of the burden, for our benefit and his own. "You can see the dead man lying on the snow, far up on the mountain," said he eagerly, "if you go into the town and look through one of the telescopes. I have seen him already; he is like a small, dark packet on the white ground, wrapped in his coat."

My appetite for breakfast suddenly dwindled, but not so my appetite for the climb. I was very sorry that a man had died on the mountain, but I could not bring him to life again by remaining on low levels, and so I remarked when the Boy asked me if I were still in the same mind concerning the ascent. "I shall see about a guide directly after breakfast," said I, "and when you hear a cannon fired in the town announcing the arrival of a party at the top of Mont Blanc, you will know it is an echo of my shout of Excelsior!"

"No, I won't know it," returned the Boy obstinately. "For one thing, the cannon might be fired for someone else, and besides, I won't be here."

"Oh, you'll go on with the Contessa? But I shouldn't be surprised if she were good-natured enough to wait at Chamounix to congratulate me when I come down."

"No doubt she thinks enough of you to do that. But what I mean is this: if you go up Mont Blanc, I'm going too."

"Nonsense! You'll do nothing of the kind. You

are a very plucky chap, but you're not a Hercules yet, whatever you may develop into ten years from now. No minors are permitted to ascend Mont Blanc."

"*That's* nonsense, if you like! I shall go if you do."

"I won't take you."

"I don't ask you to. I shan't start until after you've gone, so, you see, you'll have no power to prevent me."

"You are simply talking rot, my dear boy. Good heavens, you'd die of mountain sickness or exhaustion before you were half-way up."

"Perhaps. I know very little about my ability as a climber, for I've never made any big ascents, though I've scrambled about in the mountains a little at home."

"It would be madness for you to attempt such a thing. Why, don't you know it taxes the endurance of a strong man? You've only lately recovered from an illness; you told me so yourself. I shan't allow you to——"

"You're not my keeper, you know."

"But we are friends, pals. I ask you, as a great favour, to be sensible, and——"

"I asked you as a great favour not to go up Mont Blanc. Things happen. I have a feeling that something might happen to you. I should be—wretched while you were gone. I couldn't sit still under the suspense, feeling as I do. So I would follow your example."

"There'd be no danger for me. There might be death for you."

"Well, then, you can save my life if you like, by not going. If you don't go, I won't."

"Of all the brutal tyrants who have tyrannised over mankind——"

"I heard you say once that you would like to have been a professional tyrant. Why shouldn't I qualify for the part?"

"You are cruel to put me in such a position."

"You are cruel to make me do it, for your own selfish amusement."

"By Jove! You talk like an exacting woman!"

The blood rushed to his face so hotly that it forced water into the brilliant eyes of wild-chicory blue.

"If I were a woman I don't think I would be an exacting one. I should only want people I—liked, to do things because they cared about me, otherwise favours would be of no value. We're pals, as you say, great pals, but if you don't care enough——"

"Oh, hang it all, Kid, I'll give the thing up," I broke in, crossly. "I'll potter about with you and the Contessa in Chamounix, and take some nice, pretty, proper walks. But all the same, you're a little brute."

"Do you hate me?"

"Not precisely. But if I stop down here, Satan will certainly find mischief for my idle hands to do. I shall try to take your Contessa away from you, perhaps."

"Oh, will you? Then I shall try to keep her; and we shall see which is the better man."

He rose from the table with a little swagger, ruffling it gaily in his triumph over me; and so young, so small he seemed, to be boasting of his manhood and his prowess in the warfare of love, that I burst out laughing.

"Come on," I said, "let's go and have a look

round Chamounix, since there's no better sport to be had."

So we strolled out of the *vaste parc avec chamois* into the streets of the gay and charming little town, lying like a bright crystal at the foot of Mont Blanc. Round each of several big telescopes under striped canvas umbrellas, was collected a crowd. We could guess at what they were looking. "Shall we stop and see that piteous dark packet lying lonely on the snow?" I asked, pausing. But the Boy hurried on. "No, no," he said, "I should feel as if I had been spying on the dead through a keyhole. I want to buy something at the shops."

"And I want to see the statue of Horace de Saussure, the first man who ever got to the top of Mont Blanc," said I, with reproachful meaning in my tone.

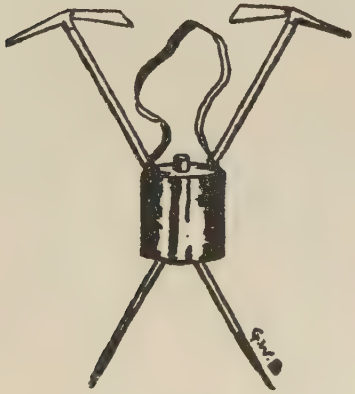
The shops were almost as attractive as those of Lucerne, and gave an air of modernity and civilisation to the little place, which would have been out of the picture, had it not contrived to suggest the piquancy of contrast. The Boy spent a hundred francs for a silver chamois poised upon the apex of a perilous peak of uncut amethysts, mounted on ebony, and I was witty at the expense of his purchase, likening it to the white elephant of Instantaneous Breakfasts et Cie., which I had long ago cast behind me.

"You will be throwing your chamois away in a day or two," I prophesied, "or sending it back to our landlord to add to his collection of animals."

"You will see that I shan't throw it away," the Boy returned, and insisted upon carrying the parcel in his hand, instead of having it sent from the shop to the hotel. When we had learned something of the town we sauntered homeward; and seated in the

vaste parc with a novel and a red silk parasol, we found Gaetà. "Where have you been so early?" she asked.

"To find a burnt-offering for your shrine," said the Boy; and tearing off the white wrappings, he gave her the silver chamois.



CHAPTER XIX

The Little Rift within the Lute

"There comes a mist, and a weeping rain,
And nothing is ever the same again;
Alas!"
—George Macdonald.

We devoted three days to some exquisite excursions, which more than half consoled me for sacrificing Mont Blanc to make a tyrant's holiday, and then decided to push on to Aix-les-Bains, stopping on the way for a glimpse of Annecy.

The Contessa had planned to go from Chamounix to Aix by rail with her friends, but she had either fallen in love with our mode of travelling or pretended it. A hint to the Boy, and Fanny-anny was placed at her disposal for a ride from Chamounix to Annecy, a lady's saddle being easily picked up in a town of shops which miss no opportunities. As for the Baron and Baronessa, it was plain to see the drift of their minds. So angry were they at the change of programme, that it would have been a satisfaction to quarrel with Gaetà, and leave her in a huff. But their devotion to Paolo, which was almost pathetic, forbade them this form of self-indulgence. They curbed their annoyance with the bit of common-sense, though it galled their mouths, and consented to drive to Annecy in a carriage provided by Gaetà for their accommodation. They even constrained themselves to be civil to the Boy and me,

though their heavy politeness had the electrical quality of a lull before a storm. How that storm would break I could not foresee, but that it would presently burst above our heads I was sure.

There was no longer a question that Boy was hot favourite in the race for Gaetà's smiles. There might have been betting on me for "place," but it would have been foolish to put money on my chances as winner. The young wretch scarcely gave me a chance for a word with the Contessa, for if I walked on the left he walked on the right of her as she rode, his little brown hand on the new saddle, which had taken the place of the old one sent on to Annecy by *grande vitesse*. I would have surrendered, being too lazy for a struggle, had I not been somewhat piqued by the Boy's behaviour. He had affected not to care for Gaetà at first, and had even feigned annoyance at the temporary addition to our party, while in reality he could have had little genuine wish for my society, or he would not now betray such eagerness in the game he was playing. The vague sense of wrong I suffered gave me a wish for reprisal of some sort, and the only one convenient at the moment was to prevent the offender from having a clear course. I found a certain mean pleasure in stirring the Boy to jealousy by reviving, when I could, some half-dead ember of Gaetà's former interest in me, and his face showed sometimes that my assiduity displeased him.

This was encouragement to persevere, and I praised the Contessa to him when we happened to be alone together. "You have a short memory, it seems," said he. "You told me not so long ago that you'd been in love with a girl who jilted you. Have you forgotten her already?"

I winced under this thrust, but hoped that the Boy did not see it. His stab reminded me that I had found very little time lately to regret Miss Blantock, now Lady Jerveyson; and Molly Winston's words recurred to me: "If I could only prove to you that you aren't and never have been in love with Helen." I had retorted that to accomplish this would be difficult, and she had confidently replied that she would engage to do it, if I would "take her prescription." I had taken her prescription, and—indisputably the wound had become callous, though I was not prepared to admit that it had healed. However, if I had ceased actively to mourn the grocer's triumph, it was not Gaetà who had wrought the magic change. What had caused it I was myself at a loss to understand, but I did not wish to argue the matter with the Boy. He was welcome to think what he chose.

"Hearts are caught in the rebound sometimes, if for once a proverb can be right," said I evasively; though a few weeks ago, when Molly had been constantly alluding to her friend Mercédès, I had told myself that no one could achieve such a feat with mine.

To this suggestion the Boy made no response, save to tighten his lips, resolving, I supposed, that if hearts were flying about like shuttlecocks, his battledore should be ready to catch the Contessa's.

Our road from Chamounix to Annecy led us past gorges and over high precipices and among noble mountains, but my mind was no longer in a condition to receive or retain strong impressions of natural beauty. I was irritable and "out of myself," vainly wishing back the days when the Boy and I, undisturbed by feminine society, had travelled tran-

quilly, side by side, giving each other thought for thought.

> "Nothing can be as it has been ;
> Better, so call it, only not the same,"

Browning said; and so, I feared, it would be after this with me.

We were all to stay at Annecy for a night and a day, the Contessa having announced that she and her friends would stop too; then Gaetà and the others were to go on to Aix-les-Bains by rail, and the Boy and I were to follow on foot, attended by our satellites. Later, we were to spend a few days at the Contessa's villa and get upon our way again, journeying south. But it did not seem to me that my little Pal and I would ever be as we had been before, even though we walked from Aix-les-Bains all the way down to the Riviera shoulder to shoulder. I had the will to be the same, but he was different now; and though we left Gaetà in the flesh at her villa, entertaining guests, Gaetà in the spirit would still flit between us as we went. The Boy would be thinking of her; I should know that he was thinking of her, and—there would be an end of our confidences.

The way, though kaleidoscopic with changing beauties, seemed long to Annecy. By the time that we arrived, after two days' going, the Contessa had eyes or dimples or laughter for no one but the Boy. Sometimes he was seized with sudden moods of rebellion against his new slavery, and was almost rude to her, saying things which she would not have forgiven readily from another, but the child-woman appeared to find a keen delight in forgiving him. Seeing the preference bestowed upon the young

American, Paolo's brother and sister were inclined to make common cause with me.

In the garden of the old-fashioned hotel at Annecy where we all took up our headquarters, they came and encamped beside me, at a table near which I sat alone, smoking, after our first dinner in the place. A moment later Gaetà passed with the Boy, pacing slowly under the interlacing branches of the trees.

"I believe that youth to be a fortune-hunter!" exclaimed the thin, dark Baron.

"You're wrong there," said I, "he's very rich."

"At all events, it is ridiculous, this flirtation," exclaimed the plump Baronessa. "He is a mere child. Gaetà is making a fool of herself. You are her friend. You should see this and put a stop to the affair in some way."

"As to that, many women marry men younger than themselves," I replied, willing to tease the lady, though I could have laughed aloud at the bare idea of marriage for the Boy. "Still," I went on more consolingly, "I hardly think it will come to anything serious between them."

"Ah, if you say that, you little know Gaetà," protested Gaetà's friend. "She is infatuated—infatuated with this youth of seventeen or eighteen, whom she insists, to justify her foolishness, is a year older than he can possibly be. Something must be done, and soon, or she is capable of proposing to him, if he pretend to hang back."

"Something will be done, my dear; do not be unnecessarily excited," said the Baron. "I fear we have not the full sympathy of Lord Lane."

"If you mean, will I do anything to keep the two apart, I confess you haven't," I answered. "The Contessa di Ravello is her own mistress, and I should

say if she wanted the moon, it would be bad for anyone who tried to keep her from getting it."

"We shall see," murmured the Baron, as the Boy had murmured a few days ago; and behind this hint also I felt that there lurked some definite plan.

I had been to Aix-les-Bains years before, but it had not then occurred to me to visit Annecy, so near by. It was the Boy who had suggested coming, and we had planned excursions up the lake, looking out on our guide-book maps various spots of historic or picturesque interest which we should see *en route,* especially Menthon, the birthplace of St. Bernard. Now, here we were at Annecy, and in all the world there could not be a town more charming. By the placid blue lake—whose water, I am convinced, would still be the colour of melted turquoises if you corked it up in a bottle—you could wander along shadowed paths, strewn with the gold coin of sunshine, through a park of dells as bosky-green as the fair forest of Arden. In the quaint, old-fashioned streets of the town you were tempted to pause at every other step for one more snap-shot. You longed to linger on the bridge and call up a passing panorama of historic pageants. All these things the Boy and I would have done, and enjoyed peacefully, had we been alone, but Gaetà elected to find Annecy "dull." There was nothing to do but take walks, or sit by the lake, or drive for lunch to the Beau Rivage, or go out for an afternoon's trip in one of the little steamers. Beautiful? Oh, yes; but quiet places made one want to scream or stand on one's head when one had been in them a day or two. It would be much more amusing at Aix. There were the Casinos, and the *fêtes de nuit,* with lots of coloured lanterns in the gardens, and fireworks, and music; and then, the baccarat!

That was amusing, if you liked, for half an hour, and when you were bored there was always something else. She must really get to Aix, and see that the Villa Santa Lucia was in order. We would promise—promise—*promise* to follow at once? We would find our rooms at her villa ready, with flowers in them for a welcome, and we must not be too long on the way.

Gaetà left in the evening, the Boy and I seeing her off at the train; and twelve hours later we started for Châtelard, Joseph taking us away from the high-roads—which would have been perfect for Molly's Mercédès—along certain romantic by-paths which he knew from former journeys. Conversation no longer made itself between us; we had to make it, and in the manufacturing process I mentioned my "friends who were motoring."

"They may turn up before long now," I said, "judging from the plans they wrote of in a letter I had from them at Aosta. It's just possible that they will pass through Aix. You would like them."

"I have run away from my own friends, and—gone rather far to do it," said the Boy. "Yet I seem destined to meet other people's. It was with very different intentions that I set out on this journey of mine."

"'Journeys end in lovers' meetings,'" I quoted carelessly. "Perhaps yours will end so."

"I thought I had done with lovers," said the Boy, with one of his odd smiles.

"You're not old enough to begin with them yet."

"I was thinking of—my sister. Her experience was a lesson in love I'm not likely to forget soon. Yet sometimes I—I'm not sure I learned the lesson in the right way. But we won't talk of that. Tell

me about your friends. I'm becoming inured to social duties now."

"You don't seem to find them too onerous. As for my friends—they're an old chum of mine, Jack Winston, and his bride of a few months, the most exquisite specimen of an American girl I ever met. Perhaps you may have heard of her. She's the daughter of Chauncey Randolph, one of your millionaires. Look out! Was that a stone you stumbled over?"

"Yes. I gave my ankle a twist. It's all right now. I daresay my sister knows your friend."

"I must ask Molly Winston, when I write, or see her. But you've never told me your sister's name, except that she's called 'Princess.' If I say Miss Laurence——"

"There are so many Laurences. Did you—ever mention in your letters to—your friends that you were—travelling with anyone?"

"I haven't written to them since I knew your name, but before that, I told them there was a boy whom I had met by accident and chummed up with, just before Aosta. I think I rather spread myself on a description of our meeting."

"You *didn't* do that! How horrid of you!"

"Oh, I put it right afterwards, I assure you, in another letter. I told them that in spite of the bad beginning, we'd become no end of pals. That we travelled together, stopped at the same hotels, and—what's the matter?"

"Nothing. My ankle does hurt a little, after all. Shall you go on in your friends' motor car if you meet them?" He looked up at me very earnestly as he spoke.

"At one time I thought of doing so, if we ran across each other. But now that I've got you——"

"Who knows how long we may have each other? Either one of us may change his plans—suddenly. You mustn't count on me, Lord Lane."

"Look here," I said crossly, "do speak out. Don't hint things. Do you mean me to understand that you wish to stop at Aix, indefinitely, and play out your little comedy of flirtation to its close?"

"I don't know what I intend to do; now, less than ever," answered the Boy in a very low voice, the shadow of his long lashes on his cheeks.

I was too much hurt to question him further, and we pursued our way in silence, along the lake side, and then up the billowy lower slopes of the Semnoz. We had showers of rain in the sunshine; and the long, thin spears of crystal glittered like spun glass, until dim clouds spread over the bright patches of blue, and the world grew mistily grey-green.

We had planned long ago, before the spell of the Contessa fell upon us, to make the journey we were taking now, by way of the Semnoz, the so-called Rigi of this Alpine Savoy, which is neither wholly French nor wholly Italian. But we had abandoned the idea since, in a fine frenzy to keep our promise of rejoining her with all speed lest she perish alone in the icy disapproval of her friends. When the mists closed round us, we ceased to regret the decision, if we had regretted it; for instead of seeing Savoy spread out beneath us, with its snow mountains and fertile valleys, lit with azure lakes—as many as the Graces—we should have been wrapped in cloud blankets.

After a walk of thirty-two kilometres, we came to Châtelard, and, having known little or nothing of the town, we were surprised to find that most other people knew of it as a great centre for excursions.

It was almost as unbelievable as that the places where we lived could possibly go on existing in exactly the same way during our absence.

"There are actually three hotels, all said to be good," I remarked, quoting from my guide-book. "To which shall we go?"

The Boy hesitated. "Choose which you like, for yourself," he replied with a slight appearance of embarrassment. "As for me, I will make up my mind —later."

I could take this in but one way: as a snub. Evidently he had selected this fashion of intimating to me the change that Gaetà's intrusion had worked in our relations. I bit back a sharp word or two which I might have regretted by-and-bye, and answered not at all. In consequence of this little passage, however, the Boy went to one hotel, and I to another, where I put Joseph up also.

A sense of loneliness was upon me, therefore my conscience stirred uneasily, and I reproached myself in that of late I had neglected the affairs of my muleteer. At one time he and I had conversed at length on such subjects as mules, women, perdition, and the like; but for many days now our intercourse had consisted mostly of a "Good morning, Joseph!" "Good morning, Monsieur!"

To-night I sent for him, and enquired whether he had anything to wish for.

"Ah, Monsieur, there is but one thing for which I ask at present," he said.

"Anything I can manage, Joseph?"

"I fear not, Monsieur. It is the assurance that the poor young soul I am trying to lead out of darkness may reach the light before we have to part."

"Innocentina's?"

"The same, Monsieur."

"You think her conversion within sight?"

"Just round the corner, if I may so express it."

"Yet I hear that she tells her employer she is devoting all her energies towards saving you from eternal fire. It was her excuse for letting the bag drop off Souris' back without noticing it, and for allowing Fanny's saddle to chafe."

"Ah, Monsieur, women are ready with excuses. Do you think I would permit any preoccupation of mine to interfere with the well-being of Finois?"

"Even saving a pretty woman's soul? No, Joseph, to do you justice, I don't. But I warn you, you may not have much more time before you to finish your good work. Innocentina's employer and I may part company before long." Though I smiled, I spoke heavily.

Joseph's melancholy dark face flushed, and the light died out of his eyes. "Thank you, Monsieur, I will do my best to be quick," said he, as if it had been a question of saddling Finois, instead of rescuing a young lady from the clutches of the Scarlet Woman. Whatever progress he had really been making with Innocentina's soul, it was clear that she had been getting in some deadly work upon his honest heart.

CHAPTER XX

The Great Paolo

"Condescension is an excellent thing; but it is strange how one-sided the pleasure of it is."—R. L. Stevenson.

After I went to bed that night, I thought long and bitterly of the Little Pal's defection. Mentally, I addressed him as a young gazelle who had gladdened me with his soft dark eye, only to withdraw the light of that orb when it was most needed. As he apparently wished me to understand that, now he was on with Gaetà, he would fain be off with me, I would take him not only at his word, but before it. I would make an excuse to avoid stopping at the Contessa's villa, but would let him revel there alone in his glory; if one did not count the Di Nivolis.

Next morning we met by appointment at eight o'clock, and tried to behave as if nothing had happened; but I realised that I would have been a dead failure as an actor. I was grumpy and glum, and the coaxing, child-like ways which the Boy used for my beguiling were in vain. I did not say anything about my change of plans for Aix, but I brooded darkly upon them throughout the day, my mood eating away all pleasure in the charming scenery through which we passed, as a black worm eats into the heart of a cherry.

We had about twenty-nine kilometres to go, and by the time that the shadows were growing long and blue, we were approaching Aix-les-Bains.

Nature had gone back to the simple apparel of her youth, here. She was idyllic and charming, but we were not to ask of her any more sensational splendours, by way of costume, for she had not brought them with her in her dress-basket. There were near green hills, and far blue mountains, and certain rocky eminences in the middle distance, but nothing of grandeur. Poplars marched along with us on either side, primly on guard, and puritanical, though all the while their myriad little fingers seemed to twinkle over the keyboard of an invisible piano, playing a rapid waltz.

Then we came at last into Aix-les-Bains, where I had spent a merry month during a "long," in Oxford days. I had not been back since.

Already the height of the season was over, for it was September now, but the gay little watering-place seemed crowded still, and in our knickerbockers, with our pack-mule and donkeys, and their attendants, we must have added a fantastic note to the dance-music which the very breezes play among tree-branches at light-hearted Aix.

"Pretty, isn't it?" I remarked indifferently, as we passed through some of the most fashionable streets.

"Yes, very pretty," said the Boy. "But what is there that one misses? There's something—I'm not sure what. Is it that the place looks huddled together? You can't see its face, for its features. There are people like that. You are introduced to them; you think them charming; yet when you've been away for a little while you couldn't for your life recall the shape of their nose, or mouth, or eyes. I feel it is going to be so with Aix, for me."

The villa which the Contessa had taken for a few

weeks before her annual flitting for Monte Carlo, was on the way to Marlioz, and we had been told exactly how to find it. Still silent as to my ultimate intentions, I tramped along with the Boy beside me, Joseph and Innocentina bringing up the rear. We would know the villa from the description we had been given, and having passed out of the town, we presently saw it; a little dun-coloured house, standing up slender and graceful among trees, like a charming grey rabbit on the watch by its hidden warren in the woods.

"I'm tired, aren't you?" asked the Boy. "I shall be glad to rest."

Now was my time. "I shan't be able to rest quite yet," said I, with a careless air. "I shall see you in, say 'How-de-do' to the Contessa, and then I must be off to the hotel where I used to stop. I remember it as delightful."

"Why," exclaimed the Boy blankly, "but I thought—I thought we were going to stay with the Contessa!"

"You are, but I'm not," I explained calmly. "My friends the Winstons may very likely turn up at the same hotel" (this was true on the principle that anything, no matter how unexpected, *may* happen); "and if they should, I'd want to be on the spot to give them a welcome. I wouldn't miss them for the world."

"The Contessa will be disappointed," said the Boy slowly.

"Oh no, I don't think so; and if she is, a little, you will easily console her."

"If I had dreamed that you wouldn't——" The Boy began his sentence hastily, then cut it as quickly short.

I opened the gate. We passed in together, Joseph remaining outside according to my directions, keeping Fanny-anny as well as Finois, while Innocentina followed the Boy with the pack-donkey.

A turn in the path brought us suddenly upon a lawn, surrounded with shrubbery which at first had hidden it from our view. There, under a huge crimson umbrella, rising flowerlike by its long slender stem from the smooth-shaven grass, sat four persons in basket chairs, round a small tea table. Gaetà, in green as pale as Undine's draperies, sprang up with a glad little cry to greet us. The Baron and Baronessa smiled bleak "society smiles," and a handsome, fair young man frankly glared.

Evidently this was the great Paolo, master of the air and ships that sail therein; and as evidently he had heard of us.

Now I knew what the Baron had meant when he said to his wife: "Something *shall* happen, my dear." He had telegraphed a danger-signal to Paolo, and Paolo had lost not a moment in responding. This looked as if Paolo meant business in deadly earnest, where the Contessa was concerned; for how many dinners and medals must he not have missed in Paris, how many important persons in the air-world must he not have offended, by breaking his engagements in the hope of making one here?

He was fair, with a Latin fairness, this famous young man. There was nothing Saxon or Anglo-Saxon about him. No one could possibly bestow him—in a guess—upon any other country than his native Italy. He was thirty-one or two perhaps, long-limbed and wolfishly spare, like his elder brother, whom he resembled thus only. He had an eagle nose, prominent red lips, sulky and sensuous, a

fine though narrow forehead under brown hair cut *en brosse,* a shade darker than the small, waxed moustache and pointed beard. His brows turned up slightly at the outer corners, and his heavy-lidded, tobacco-coloured eyes were bold, insolent, and passionate at the same time.

This was the man who wished to marry butterfly Gaetà, and who had come on the wings of the wind, in an airship "shod with fire," or in the *train de luxe,* to defend his rights against marauders.

His look, travelling from me to the Boy, and from the Boy to Innocentina and meek grey Souris, was so eloquent of contempt passing words, that I should have wanted to knock the sprawling flannelled figure out of the basket chair, if I had not wanted still more to yell with laughter.

He, the Boy and I were like dogs from rival kennels eyeing each other over, and thinking poorly of the other's points. Paolo di Nivoli was doubtless saying to himself what a splendid fellow he was, and how well dressed and famous; also how absurd it really would be to fear one of us dusty, knickerbockered, thick-booted, panama-hatted louts, in the tournament of love. The donkey, too, with its pack, and Innocentina with her toadstool hat, must have added for the aëronaut the last touch of shame to our environment.

As for us,—if I may judge the Boy by myself,—we were totting up against the Italian his stiff crest of hair, for all the world like a toothbrush, rampant, gules; the smear of wax on the spikes of his unnecessarily fierce moustache; the ridiculous pinpoints of his narrow brown shoes; the flaunting newness of his white flannels; the detestable little tucks in his shirt; his pink necktie.

In fact, each was despising the other for that on which the other prided himself.

All this passed in a glance, but the frigid atmosphere grew no warmer for the introduction hastily effected by Gaetà. To be sure, the Boy bowed, I bowed, and Paolo bowed the lowest of the trio, so that we saw the parting in his hair; but three honest snorts of defiance would have been no more unfriendly than our courtesies.

Not a doubt that Gaetà felt the electricity in the air, with the instinct of a woman; but with the instinct of a born flirt, she thrilled with it. Her colour rose; her warm eyes sparkled. She was perfectly happy; for—from her point of view—were there not here three male beings all secretly ready to fly at one another's throat for love of her; and what can a spoiled beauty want more?

She covered the little awkwardness with charming tact, for all her childishness; and then the excuses I made for my defection caused a diversion. She was so sorry; it was really too bad. I was going to desert her for other friends. Were not we friends, nice new friends, so much more interesting than old friends, whom you knew inside-out, like your frocks or your gloves? But surely, I would come often, very often to the villa—always for *déjeuner* and *dîner,* till the other friends arrived, was it not? And I would not try to take Signor Boy (this was the name she had built on mine for him) away from her and the dear Baronessa?

I reassured her on this last point, promised everything she asked, and then got away as quickly as I could, lest I should disgrace myself by letting escape the wild laughter which I caged with difficulty.

It was arranged that we should all meet that even-

ing, after dinner, at the Villa des Fleurs, for one of those *fêtes de nuit* which Gaetà loved; and then I turned my back upon the group under the red umbrella, without a glance for the Boy.

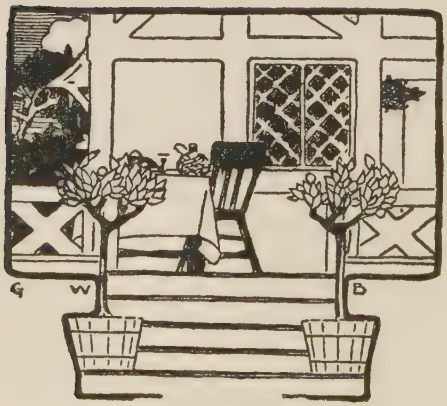
I tramped into the town once more, with Joseph close behind, leading his own Finois and Innocentina's Fanny, and found my way to the hotel, in its large shady garden, where coloured lamps were already beginning to glow in the twilight. Soon I had all the resources of civilisation at my command: a white-and-gold panelled suite, with a bath as big as a boudoir, and hot water enough to make of me a better man (I hoped) than Paolo di Nivoli.

Later I dined on the wide balcony, with flower-fragrance blowing towards me from the mysterious blue dusk of the garden. I ought, I said to myself, to be well-contented, for the dinner was excellent, and the surroundings a picture in aquarelles. Still, I had a vague sense of something very wrong, such as a well brought up motor car must feel when it has a screw loose, and can't explain to the chauffeur. What was it? The Boy's absence? Nonsense; he didn't want me, rather the contrary. Why should I want him? A few weeks ago I had not known that he existed. I drank a pint of dry champagne, iced almost to freezing point; but instead of hardening my heart against the ex-Brat, to my annoyance the sparkling liquid gradually but surely produced the opposite effect.

The fragrance of the flowers, the soft wind among the chestnut trees in the garden, the beauty of the night, all reproached me for my conduct to the young creature I had abandoned. What use was it to remind myself that I had merely taken a leaf out of his book, that I had even played into his hands, as

he seemed to desire? The answer would come that he was a boy, and I a man. No matter what he had done, I ought not to have left him to flirt with Gaetà under the jealous eyes of the Italian, who was "a whirlwind, and caught a woman off her feet."

It was too late now to think of this, for I had refused Gaetà's invitation to visit at her house, and having done so I could not ask for another, even if I would. Probably the Boy would know well enough how far to go, and to protect himself from consequences when he had reached the limit.



CHAPTER XXI

The Challenge

"'Do I indeed lack courage?' inquired Mr. Archer of himself, 'Courage, . . . that does not fail a weasel or a rat—that is a brutish faculty?'"—R. L. STEVENSON.

I DRANK my black coffee and smoked a cigarette. Then, a glance at my watch told me that it was time to keep the appointment at the Villa des Fleurs, five minutes' walk from the hotel. I expected the Contessa's party to be late, but somewhat to my surprise they had already arrived, and a quick glance showed me that, outwardly at least, the relations of all were still amicable.

"Signor Boy did not wish to come," said the Contessa to me, "but I made him. He says that he does not like crowds. Look at him now; he has wandered far from us already, probably to find some dark corner where he can forget that there are too many people. But then, it was sweet of him to come at all, since it was only to please me."

It was true. The Boy had slipped away from the seats we had taken near the music. He had gone to avoid me, perhaps, I said to myself bitterly. I need not have spoiled my dinner with anxiety for his welfare; he seemed to be taking very good care of himself.

"I was horribly worried at dinner," whispered Gaetà to me, the light of the fireworks playing rosily

over her face. "Those two—you know of whom I speak—weren't a bit nice to each other. It was Paolo who began it, of course, saying little, hateful things that sounded smooth, but had a second meaning; and Signor Boy is not stupid. He did not miss the bad intention, oh, not he, and he said other little things back again, much sharper and wittier than Paolo, who was furious, and gnawed his lip. It was most exciting."

"Did you try to pour oil on the troubled waters?" I asked.

"I was very pleasant to them both, if that is what you mean, first to one and then to the other. After dinner, I gave Signor Boy a rose, and Paolo a gardenia."

"How charming of you," I commented drily. "If that didn't smooth matters, what could?"

The aëronaut was sitting on Gaetà's left, I on her right, with the Baronessa next me on the other side, and both were straining every nerve to hear our confidences, though pretending to be lost in admiration of the *feu d'artifice*.

When the Contessa laughed softly, her little dark head not far from my ear, the Italian sprang up, and walked away, unable to endure five minutes of Gaetà's neglect. She and I continued our conversation, though our eyes wandered, mine in search of the Boy, hers I fancy in quest of the same object.

Soon I caught sight of the slim, youthful figure, in its rather fantastic evening dress, the becoming dinner-jacket, the Eton collar, the loosely tied bow at the throat, and the full, black knickerbocker trousers, like those worn in the days of Henri Quatre. As I watched it moving through the crowd, and finally subsiding in a seat under an isolated tree,

I saw the boyish form joined by a tall and manly one. Paolo di Nivoli had followed his young rival, and presently came to a stand close to the Boy's chair. He folded his arms, and looked down into the eyes which were upturned in answer to some word.

We could not see the expression of the two faces. We saw only that the man and the boy were talking, spasmodically at first, then continuously.

"I do hope they're not quarrelling," said Gaetà, in the seventh heaven of delight.

"Of course not," I replied, annoyed at her frivolity. "They are too sensible."

"Let us make some excuse, and go over to them," she pleaded. "I am tired of sitting still."

There was nothing for it but to obey her whim. I took her across the grassy space which divided us from the two under the tree, and she began to chatter about the fireworks. What did Signor Boy think of them? Was not Aix a charming place?

But abruptly, in the midst of her babble, Paolo di Nivoli swept her away from the Boy and me, in his best "whirlwind" manner, which doubtless thrilled her with mingled terror and delight.

"Nice night, isn't it?" I remarked brilliantly.

"Yes," said the Boy.

"Did the Contessa give you a good dinner?"

"No—yes—that is, I didn't notice."

"Perhaps that was natural."

The Boy did not answer, but I heard him swallow hard. He was on his feet now, having risen at Gaetà's coming, and he stood kicking the grass with the point of his small patent-leather toe. Then, suddenly, he looked up straight into my face, with big dilated eyes.

"What's the matter?" I asked, when still he did not speak.

"Oh, Man, I'm in *the most awful scrape.*"

"What's up?"

"I should be thankful to tell you about it, and get your advice, if—you were like you used to be."

"It's you who have changed, not I."

"No, it's you."

"Don't let's dispute about it. Tell me what's the trouble. Has that bounder been cheeking you?"

"Worse than that. He said things that made me angry, and—then I cheeked him."

"Just now—under this tree?"

"It began at dinner, a little. But the particular thing I'm speaking of happened here. I couldn't stand it, you know."

"What did he say?"

"He asked me how old I was, at first—in *such* a tone! I answered that I was old enough to know my way about, I hoped. He said he should have thought not, as I travelled with my nurse. Then he wanted to know what was in Souris' pack, whether I carried condensed milk for my nursing-bottle. It was all I could do to keep from boxing his ears, before everyone, but I kept still, and laughed a little; presently I answered in a drawling sort of way, saying I needn't tell him that what Souris carried was no affair of his, because when I came to think of it, after all it was quite natural that a great donkey should be interested in a small one."

"By Jove, you little fire-eater!"

"Well, I had to show him that I was an American, anyhow."

"I suppose he was annoyed."

"He was very much annoyed. Man, he's chal-

lenged me to fight a duel. Only think of it, a real duel! He said I'd have to fight, or he'd thrash me for a coward. I—it's a horrid scrape, but I don't see how I'm going to get out of it with—with honour. Will you—if I do have to—but look here, I won't have him running me through with a *sword*, or anything of that sort. I'm afraid I couldn't face that. I wouldn't mind a revolver quite as much."

"The big bully!" I exclaimed. "But of course it's all rot. There can be no question of your fighting him."

"I don't know. I'd rather do that—if we could have pistols—than have him think an American—could be a coward. I'm not a coward, I hope, only—only I never thought of anything like this. He's going to send a friend of his to call on you, as a friend of mine, he said. I suppose that means a what-you-may-call-'em—a 'second,' doesn't it? If I must fight with him, Man, you will be my second, won't you, and—and act for me, if that's the right word?"

Gazing up earnestly, his eyes very big, his face pale, he looked no more than fourteen, and the idea of a duel to the death between this child and Gaetà's whirlwind would have been comic in the extreme, had I not been enraged with the whirlwind.

"I'll be your friend, and get you out of the scrape," I said. "But it will mean that you must give up the Contessa."

"Give up the Contessa!" echoed the Boy. "What do *I* want with the Contessa! I'm sick of the sight of her."

"Since when?"

"Since the first day we met. I don't think she's

even pretty. What you can see in her, I don't know—the silly little giggling thing! There, it's out at last."

"What *I* see in her?" I repeated. "I like that."

"I always supposed you did. But I can't *stand* her."

"Well, of all the—— Look here, why have you been hanging after her, if you——"

"I didn't. I just wasn't going to let you make a fool of yourself over her, and then regret it afterwards. So I—I did my best to take her attention away from you, and I succeeded fairly well. It—vexed me to see you falling in love with her. She wasn't worth it."

"There was never the remotest chance of my doing so."

"You said there was."

"I was chaffing, just to hear myself talk. I should have thought you would know that."

"How could I know? You were always saying how pretty and dainty she was, and quoting poetry about her, while all the time I could read her shallow little mind, and see how different she was from what you imagined."

"I think I have a fairly clear idea of her limitations."

"But you told me that you'd planned to go down to Monte Carlo expressly to see the Contessa; and you said that it would perhaps be a wise thing for you to try and fall in love with her."

"If a man has to try and fall in love with a woman, he's pretty safe. You and I seem to have been playing at cross purposes, youngster. You thought I was in danger of falling in love, and I thought you were already in."

"You *couldn't* have believed it, really."

"I did, and supposed you wanted me out of the way."

"I was thinking the same thing about you. You did seem jealous and sulky."

"I was both; but it was because our friendship had been interfered with, Little Pal."

"Oh, Man, do you really mean that?"

"Every word of it. I wouldn't give up a talk with you for a kiss from the Contessa, of which, by the way, I'm very unlikely to have the chance. But you——"

"I've been miserable for the last few days. I—I missed you, Man."

"And I you, Boy."

"What an awful pity it is I've got to stand up and be shot, just as we're good friends again, and everything's all right!"

"You've got to do nothing of the sort. *Le cher* Paolo will, if he is really in earnest and not bluffing, send his friend to me, and matters will be settled, never fear."

"I don't fear. At least, I—hope I don't—much. Only I wasn't brought up to expect challenges to duels. They're not—in my line. But I won't apologise, whatever happens. No, I won't, I won't, *I won't*. I dare say it doesn't hurt much, being shot; and I suppose he wouldn't be so—so impolite as to shoot me in the face, would he?"

"He is not going to shoot you anywhere," said I.

"I *am* glad I told you. I was feeling—rather queer. What am I to do? Am I to go back to the villa as if nothing had happened, or—what?"

"'What' might mean coming to my hotel, but you seemed to find my society a bore."

"That's unkind. It was your own fault that I went to a different hotel at Châtelard."

"How do you make that out?"

"I can't tell you. I don't suppose you'll ever know. But if you should guess, by-and-bye, remembering something you once said, you might understand."

"Something I once said——"

"Never mind. Please don't talk of it. I'd rather be shot at. But I want you to believe that my reason wasn't the one you thought. Now, tell me what you're going to do about Signor di Nivoli. Have you made a plan?"

"One has popped into my head," I replied. "It mayn't answer, but will you give me *carte blanche* to try? If it doesn't work, I'll get you out of the mess in another way. But this would give us a chance of making Paolo eat humble pie."

"Do try it, then. I'd risk a lot for that."

"As for to-night, on the whole I think the best thing will be for you to go back to the villa. Of course we mustn't let the Contessa suspect——"

"Little cat! I wouldn't give her the satisfaction."

"Upon my word, you're not very gallant."

"I don't care. I'm sick of the Contessa. A plague upon her, and all her houses. Yet, I wish her nothing worse than that she should marry Paolo. Ugh! A man with his hair *en brosse!*"

"Probably he is saying, 'Ugh! a boy with curls on his collar.'"

"May one of his old balloons fly away with him, before he shoots me. Anyhow, he shall find that

curls don't make a coward. Only—there's just one thing before you treat with him. I won't—I *can't* —be jabbed at with anything sharp."

"You shan't," said I.

With this, the Contessa beckoned from a distance, with news that she was going home. We followed, the Boy and I, allowing her to walk far ahead, with her triumphant aëronaut, the Baron and Baronessa, radiant with satisfaction in the success of their plot, arm in arm between the two couples.

Having seen my little Daniel to the gate of the Lions' Den, I shook hands cordially with everybody, Paolo last of all. He placed his fingers with haughty reluctance in my ostentatiously proffered palm, but I held the four chilly, fish-like things (chilly only for me) long enough to mutter, *sotto voce:* "I want a word with you on a matter of importance. I'll walk up and down the road for twenty minutes."

His impulse was to refuse, I could see by the sharp upward toss of his chin. But a certain quality in my look, clearly visible to him in the light of the gate lamp (I was at some pains to produce the effect), warned him that if his bloodthirsty plans were not to be nipped in the red bud, he must bend his will to mine in this one instance.

He answered with a glance, and I knew that I should not be kept long on my beat.

CHAPTER XXII

An American Custom

"Oh, have it your own way; I am too old a hand to argue with young gentlemen, . . . I have too much experience, thank you."—R. L. STEVENSON.

FIVE minutes, ten minutes passed, after the farewells. Then, as I sauntered by on the other side of the way, I heard the sound of a foot on gravel, and Paolo di Nivoli appeared under the gate light. There he paused, expecting me to cross to him, but I allotted him the part of Mahomet and selected for myself that of the Mountain. Shrugging his square shoulders, he came striding over the road to me; and I had scored one small victory. I hoped that I might take it for an omen.

"I do not understand the nature of this appointment, Monsieur," began the Italian. "I intended to send my friend Captain de Sales to you to——"

"Ah, yes, that is the Continental way in these little affairs," I ventured to interrupt him coolly. "On our side of the Channel we are rather ignorant on such matters, I fear. But my young friend Mr. Laurence is an American."

"Do you mean that he will refuse to fight, after insulting me?" asked Paolo, bristling.

"Not at all. He is very young, and this will be his first duel. He may have misunderstood your intentions. But I gathered from him that you had

said he would have to fight; that you then requested him to name a friend to whom you could send a friend of yours——"

"This is the fact. There was no misunderstanding. He named you."

"Yes; but as I said, he is an American."

"What of that, since he will fight?"

"As a duellist yourself, no doubt a successful one, you must be aware that such matters are conducted differently in the States."

"I know nothing of that. I know only our own ways, which are good enough for me."

"But my friend, being the challenged party, has the right, I believe, to choose the manner of duel."

"That will be arranged between you and my friend, according to the choice of Mr. Laurence."

"I must ask you to go slowly, just at this point. In the States, it is against the duelling code to have the details arranged by the friends of the principals. It is the principals themselves who do all that, and for the best of reasons. But as Mr. Laurence is a boy, and you are a man, it is but right that I should speak with you for him. You needn't send Captain de Sales to me. We are man to man, and in ten minutes we can have everything settled with fairness to both parties."

"This is a new idea, Monsieur, and I confess it does not commend itself to me," said Paolo.

"I suppose, however, you are anxious to fight?"

"*Sacré bleu,* but yes. The little jackanapes called me a donkey, and he had the impudence to allude to my invention as a 'balloon,' adding that there was little to choose between it and my head. *Ciel!* Do I wish to fight?"

"Then, as you must grant him the privileges of the challenged party, I fear there is only one way of carrying this thing through. He is patriotic to a fault, and he will fight in the American fashion or not at all. I must say this is to the credit of his courage, as there is to me, an Englishman, something appalling about the method. I trust that I'm not a coward, yet it would take all my nerve to face such an ordeal. No doubt, however, with the fiery Latin races it is different."

"I shall be glad of your explanation, Monsieur. What is this method of which you speak?"

"There are several small variations; there are the bits of paper; there are the matches; there are the beans of different size."

"I am more in the dark than ever."

"My friend proposes the bits of paper. Two are taken, exactly resembling each other, except in length. Both are placed inside a book, with an end, say an inch long, sticking out. You and Mr. Laurence draw simultaneously, that there can be no question of cheating. The one who draws the long bit lives—the other stands up to be shot, without defending himself."

"*Mon Dieu,* how horrible! I would never submit to such a barbarous test. That is not a duel, it is murder."

I shrugged my shoulders as gracefully, I flatter myself, as Paolo himself could have done it. But for the moment Paolo was in no shoulder-shrugging mood. His very crest—it seemed to me—was drooping.

"Nevertheless," said I, "that is the American idea of a duel, as practised in the best society. My friend is a member of the Four Hundred, and

should it become known that he had been killed in an old-fashioned, butcherly duel, his memory would be disgraced."

"But what about my memory?" demanded Paolo, with open palms. "Monsieur does not appear to think of that."

"It was not on my mind. I am acting for my friend. You have challenged a boy, a mere child, to fight you to the death. He very pluckily accepts your challenge. There are those who would think that you had done a brutal, even a cowardly thing, in putting a youth of seventeen or eighteen into such a position. Then, surely your most lenient friends would say that the least you could do would be to give the child his right of choice in weapons. Very well; he chooses two bits of paper of different lengths."

Paolo shuddered. "I will not consent," he said, swallowing hard, after a moment's reflection.

"Very well. You have had my friend's ultimatum. Am I to tell him that this is yours?"

"It is not fair!" he exclaimed. "Monsieur Laurence has his friend to act for him. As yet, I have no one."

"He is eighteen at most. You are—perhaps thirty. Still, if you insist, I will see Captain de Sales, tell him my principal's idea, and perhaps he will be more fortunate in inducing you to consent——"

"No, no," cried the Italian quickly. "I would not have him or anyone know of this monstrous proposal. I should never hear the end of it, and there would be a thousand versions of the story."

I was not surprised at this decision on his part. Indeed, I had expected it with confidence.

"You will not reconsider?" I asked nonchalantly.

"Jamais de la vie!"

"Then the duel is off."

Paolo swore.

I smiled; but he did not see the smile. I was careful that he should not.

"I consider that you and your principal have taken an unfair advantage."

"That is between you and me. If you care to raise the question——"

"I have no quarrel with you."

"Then you and Mr. Laurence must treat the misunderstanding of this evening as if it had not been. This will not be difficult, as he will go with me on an excursion to-morrow, now that his—er—engagement with you is off; and the day after, he and I think of leaving Aix altogether, by way of Mont Revard."

This plan arranged itself spontaneously; but as the Boy had ungallantly called Gaetà "a little cat," and I was slightly *blasé* of her dimples, I thought that I might count upon its being carried out.

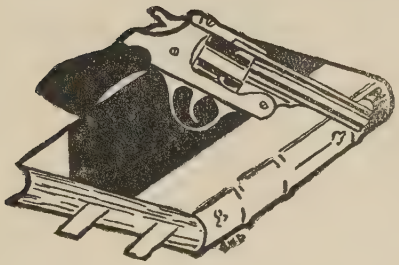
"What—he will go away?" exclaimed Paolo, all at once a different man. "He will leave Aix altogether, you say?"

"Yes. You see, we are on our way south. Mr. Laurence merely wanted a glance at Aix *en route,* and the Contessa was kind enough to invite him to her house. It was really nice of her, as he is such a boy."

"You think so? Yes—perhaps. Well, I consent on these terms to forget. You may tell your principal what I have said."

"I will," I returned. "He will be guided by me, and forget also; though I assure you, like most of his countrymen, he is a fire-eater—a fire-eater."

This time it was Paolo who volunteered to shake hands.



CHAPTER XXIII

There is No Such Girl

"She has forgotten my kisses, and I—have forgotten her name."—A. C. SWINBURNE.

I WENT early in the morning to the villa with the intention of culling the Boy like a wayside flower, and carrying him off to the lake. The hour was unearthly for a morning call, and the windows were still asleep, but I was spared the necessity of raising the echoes with an untimely peal of the bell. Under the red umbrella lounged the Boy, reading with the appearance, at least, of nonchalance. For all he could tell, I might have failed in my mission, and have come to announce the hour fixed for deadly combat; but he was not even pale. Indeed, I had never seen him rosier, or brighter-eyed.

I sat down on the rustic seat beside him, and with a glance at the veiled windows of the villa, I remarked in a low voice, "It's all right."

"That goes without saying."

"Why?"

"Because you promised."

"Thanks for the compliment. Have you had your *café au lait?*"

"No. I got up early, and thought of walking round to your hotel to see you, but decided I wouldn't."

"I half expected you."

"I didn't want to seem too—importunate. I hoped you'd come here."

"Like a promising child, I've justified your hopes. Let's walk down to the Grand Port, to a garden restaurant I remember; and over our coffee, I'll tell you the story of my diplomatic *coup*. Meanwhile, we'll discuss Shakespeare and the musical glasses."

"Anything but the Contessa," said the Boy, springing up, and cramming his panama over his curls. "I shall breathe more freely on the other side of the gate, and I shan't consider myself out of the scrape until I'm out of her house for good."

In the street he drew fuller breaths, and with each yard of distance that we put between ourselves and the villa his eyes grew brighter and his step more airy.

I unfolded my plan for the morning, which was to take a trip up the lake to the Abbey of Hautecombe, and return in time for *déjeuner*, since, as a guest of the Contessa, the Boy could scarcely absent himself all day without conspicuous rudeness. "You'll have to be tied to the lady's apron strings, if she wants you knotted there, for the afternoon," said I. "But I'm going to have a telegram from my friends to meet them on the top of Mont Revard tomorrow, so if you want an excuse——"

"What, your friends the Winstons?" he broke in, with one of the sudden flaming blushes that made him seem so young.

"Yes, why not?"

"They are coming to join you?"

"I told you they might turn up at any moment, and——"

"And now the moment has arrived. Then it has also arrived for us to say good-bye."

"Do you mean that?"

"Oh, don't think me ungrateful—or ungracious. I'm neither. But, in any case, we must sooner or later have reached the parting of the ways. You are bound to Monte Carlo. I have—the vaguest plans."

"I thought you said that your sister might be going there with friends."

"But my sister and I are—very different persons."

"Surely you would wish to meet her there?"

"It's rather undecided at present, anyhow," returned the Boy, his eyes bent on the ground as we walked, our steps less sprightly now. "There's only one thing settled, which is, that I can't go with you up Mont Revard to meet—people."

"There isn't the slightest chance of my meeting anyone there, friend Diogenes," I began. "I was only waiting for you to give me time to explain, since you're inclined to be obtuse, the difference between sending a telegram to yourself, and——"

"Oh, I see. You aren't going to meet a soul on Mont Revard?"

"Not even an astral body—by appointment. And the plan was made for your deliverance. Rather hard lines that you should kick at it."

He looked up, laughing and merry once more. "I won't kick again. Man, you are—well, you're different from other men. Yes, from every other man I've ever met."

"Am I to take that as praise?"

He nodded, his big eyes sending blue rays into mine.

"Thanks. Best man you ever met?"

Another nod, and more colour in his cheeks.

"Good enough to be introduced to your sister?"

"Good enough—even for that."

"What if I should fall in love with her?"

The Boy straightened his shoulders, after a slight start of surprise, and seemed to pull himself together. For a moment he was silent, as we walked on under the close-growing plane trees which lined the long, straight road to the Grand Port. Then at last he said, "You wouldn't."

"How can you tell that?"

"Because—she isn't—your style."

"You don't know my 'style' of girl."

"Oh, yes, I do. Don't you remember a talk we had, the first day we were friends? We told each other a lot of things. I can see that girl; the girl who—who——"

"Jilted me," I supplied. "Don't hesitate to call a spade a spade."

"A lovely, angelic-looking creature, typically English; golden hair; skin like cream and roses."

"The type has palled upon me," said I. "I know now that Molly Winston—my friend's wife—was right. I never really loved that girl. It was her popularity and my own vanity that I was in love with."

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as that I'm starving for my breakfast. If the young lady—she's married now, and I wish her all happiness—should appear before me at the end of this street, and sob out a confession of repentance for the past, it wouldn't in the least affect my appetite. I should tell her not to mind, and hurry on to join you at the corner."

"You would have forgotten by that time that there was a Me."

"I can't think of anyone or anything at the moment which would make me forget that," said I.

"The Contessa?"

"Not she, nor any other pretty doll."

"An earthquake, then?"

"Nor an earthquake: for I should probably occupy myself in trying to save your life. To tell the honest truth, Little Pal, you've become a confirmed habit with me, and I confess that the thought of finishing this tramp without you gave me a distinct shock, when you flung it at my head. If you were open to the idea of adoption, I think I should have to adopt you, you know: for, now that I've got used to seeing you about, it seems to me that, as certain advertisements say of the articles they recommend, no home would be complete without you. But there's your sister; she would object to annexation."

The Boy was busily kicking fallen leaves as he walked. "You might ask her—if you should ever see each other."

"Make her meet you at Monte Carlo, and introduce us there. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give a dinner at the Hôtel de Paris—the night after we arrive. It shall be in your hands, and of course your sister's, who ought to know your pal. You must try hard to get her to come. Is it a bargain?"

"I can't answer for her."

"But I only ask you to try your hardest. Come now, when I've told you about last night, you'll say I deserve a reward."

"Yes, I'll try."

"But, by Jove, I'd forgotten that your sister is an heiress," I went on. "I've vowed not to fall in love with a girl who has a lot of money."

"I told you that you wouldn't fall in love with her."

"Is she like you?"

"A good many people think so. That's why I'm so sure she wouldn't be the sort of girl you'd care for—you, a man who admires the English rose type or—a Contessa."

"The Contessa was your affair. For me, a woman of her type could never be dangerous. Whereas, a girl like your sister——"

"Still harping on my sister!"

"I often think of her as 'The Princess.' It's a pretty name. I fancy it suits her. Once or twice, since we've been chums, you have had letters, I know. I hope you've better news of her?"

"She's cured in body and mind. It is—rather a queer coincidence, perhaps, for like you, she has found out, so she tells me—that she wasn't really in love with—the man. She was only in love with love."

"I'm heartily glad. If she's as true and brave a little soul, as glorious a pal as you are, she will one day make some fellow the happiest man alive."

The Boy did not answer. Perhaps he was overwhelmed with the indirect praise suddenly heaped upon him; perhaps he thought that I spoke too freely of the Princess his sister. I was not sure, myself, that I had not gone beyond good taste; but calling up the picture of a girl, resembling in character the Little Pal, had stirred me to sudden enthusiasm. Fancy a girl looking at one with such eyes! a girl capable of being such a companion. It would not bear thinking of. There could be no such girl.

I was glad that, at this moment, we arrived at the Grand Port, and the garden restaurant, where my

regrets for the light that never was on land or sea—or in a girl's eyes—were temporarily drowned in *café au lait.*

The talk was no more of the unseen Princess, but of Paolo. At last I condescended to enter into a detailed account of the night's happenings, where the aëronaut was concerned, and the Boy threw up his chin, showing his little white teeth in a burst of laughter at my manœuvre. "But that *isn't* an American duel," he objected, still rippling with mirth. "You commit suicide, you know. The man who draws the short bit of paper agrees to go quietly off and kill himself decently somewhere, before the end of a stipulated time."

"I'm aware of that, but I gambled on Paolo's ignorance of the custom," said I. "I flattered myself that I'd totted up his character like a sum on a slate, and I acted on the estimate I formed. If I had kept entirely to facts, without giving the rein to my imagination, you might now be doomed to travel at this time next year to Buda-Pesth, and there drown yourself in the largest possible vat of beer. Had Paolo been unlucky in the matter of getting the short bit of paper, a little thing like that wouldn't have bothered him much. He would simply have gone off for a long trip in his newest air-ship, and conveniently forgotten such an obscure engagement. It was the thought of standing up defenceless, to be artistically potted at by you, that turned his heart to water."

"I believe you're right, and anyway, you are very clever," said the Boy. "What does one do for a man who has saved one's life?"

"If you were only a girl, now—a Princess in a fairy story—you would bestow upon me your hand,"

I replied gaily. "As it is—I can't at the moment think of a punishment to fit the crime."

"Though I can't be a Princess, I might play the Prince, and give you a ring," he said, pulling at the queer seal ring he always wore.

"But it wouldn't fit the crime—I mean the finger."

"Mere mortals never argue when the fairy Prince makes them a present. Do take the ring. I should like you to have it to—remember me by."

"To remember you by? But such chums as we have got to be don't give memory much pull; they arrange to see each other often."

"Fairy Princes vanish sometimes, you know."

"If I take your ring, will you appear if I rub it?"

The Boy was smiling, but his eyes looked grave. "If when the Fairy Prince has vanished—that is, if he *should*—you want to see him really badly, try rubbing the ring. It might work. But you'll probably lose the ring before that—and the memory."

I answered by hooking the ring, which was far too small for the least of my fingers, into the spring-loop which held my watch on its chain.

"My watch and I are one," I said. "Only burglary or death can separate me from the ring now; and if I'm smashed next time Jack Winston lets me drive his motor car, there will probably be a romantic little paragraph in the papers—perhaps even a pathetic verse—about the ring on the dead man's watch-chain, which will give you every satisfaction."

"The boat's whistling," said the Boy. "We'd better run, if we want to see the Abbey of Hautecombe before lunch."

We did run, and caught the boat in that uncertain and exciting manner which brings into play a

physical appurtenance unrecognised by science, *i. e.*, the skin of the teeth. Under the awning which shaded the deck, we took the only two seats not occupied by an abnormally large German family,—abnormally large individually as well as collectively,—and settled ourselves for half an hour's enjoyment of a charming water-panorama.

"What a heavenly place Aix is!" exclaimed the Boy fervently. "I'm so glad I came."

"I thought yesterday that you were disappointed in the place."

"Oh, yesterday was yesterday. To-day's to-day. How glorious everything is, in the world. I do love living. And I like everybody so much. What nice, good creatures one's fellow beings are. My heart warms to them. I don't believe anybody's really horrid, through and through. I should like to pat somebody on the shoulder."

"Queer thing; I feel exactly the same way this morning," said I. "Shall we throw ourselves on one another's bosom, and kiss each other on both cheeks, German fashion, to show our good will towards all mankind? I'm sure our travelling companions would warmly sympathize with our *schwärmerei*."

"No-o, perhaps we'd better not risk setting them the example, for fear they should follow it."

"Then let's shake hands."

He put out his little slim brown paw, and I seized it with such heartiness that he visibly winced, but not a squeak did the pain draw from him; and the large Germans, looking on gravely, no doubt thought that, according to some queer English rite, we had registered an important vow.

Really the world was a nice place that day, though

I might not have noticed it so much if the Boy and I had been still at loggerheads.

Yesterday, as we entered Aix, I had said to myself that the mountains surrounding the town had descended to depths of dumpy ugliness unworthy the name and dignity of mountains. I had formulated the idea that there should be world landscape-gardeners appointed, to work on a grand scale, and alter hills or mountains which Nature had neglected or bungled. But to-day, as we steamed down the long, narrow Lac de Bourget, sitting shoulder to shoulder, the light breeze fluttering butterfly-wings against our faces, I could not see that there was anything for the most fastidious taste to alter, anywhere.

As the lake at Annecy had been incredibly blue, this lake was incredibly green. No weekly penny paper in England, even in its fattest holiday number, would have room enough to compute the vast number of emeralds which must have been melted to give that vivid tint to the sparkling water. It was as easy to see the inhabitants of the lake having their luncheon at the bottom, on tables exquisitely decorated with coloured pebbles, as it is to look in through the plate-glass window of a restaurant. As our course changed, the mountains girdling the lake and filling in the perspective, grouped themselves in graceful attitudes, like professional beauties sitting for their photographs. There were châteaux dotted here and there on the hillside, and I no longer peopled them with myself and Helen Blantock. I realised that if one had a palace on the Lake of Como or Bourget, or any other romantic sheet of water, one could be happy as an elderly bachelor, if one's days were occasionally enlivened by visits from congenial friends,

such as the Winstons and the Boy. No wonder that Lamartine was happy at Chatillon, writing his Meditations! I felt that a long residence on the shores of the Lac de Bourget would inspire me to some modest meditations of my own, and I could even have taken down a few memoranda for them, had I not feared that the Boy would laugh to see my notebook come out.

I remembered Hautecombe, with its ancient Abbey, deep cream-coloured, like old ivory or the marbles of the Vatican, glimmering among dark trees, and mirrored in the lake so clearly that, gazing long at the reflection, one felt as if standing on one's head. I pointed it out to the Boy from a distance, on its jutting promontory, with the pride of the well-informed guide, and talked of the place with a superficial appearance of erudition. But after all, when he came to pin me down with questions, my bubble-reputation burst. Not a date could I pump up from the drained depths of my recollection, and in the end I had to accept ignominiously from the Boy such crumbs as he had collected from a guide-book larder. What was it to us, I contended, that the monastery was said to have been built in 1125? What did it matter that it had originally been the home of Cistercians? Why clog one's mind with such details, since it was enough for all purposes of romance to know that the old building had weathered many wars and many centuries, and that a special clause had protected the monks when Savoie was ceded by Italy to France? The great charm of the place for me, apart from its natural beauty, lay in the thought that it was the last home of dead kings, the vanished Princes of Savoie; I did not want to know the facts of its restoration at different dates, and

would indeed shut my eyes upon all such traces if I could.

Though the Abbey and its double in the lake had remained a picture in my mind, through the years since I had seen them, I was struck anew with the peaceful loveliness of the place as we approached the little landing-stage. The Kings of Savoie had chosen well in choosing to sleep their last sleep at Hautecombe.

The Boy and I slowly ascended the deeply shadowed road which led up the hill to the Abbey, but leisurely as we walked, we soon outpaced the Germans. For this we were not sorry, since it gave us the silent grey church to ourselves—and the sleeping Kings. We bestowed money for his charities upon the white-robed monk who would have shown us the tombs and the chapels, conscientiously gabbling history the while; and then, with compliments, we freed him from the duty. His hard facts would have been like dogs yapping at our heels, and, as the Boy said, we would not have been able to hear ourselves think.

We whispered as if fearing to wake the sleepers, as we wandered from one bed of marble in its dim niche, to another. Never, perhaps, did so many crowned heads lie under the same roof as at peaceful Hautecombe, sleeping longer, more soundly far, than the Princess in her enchanted Palace in the Wood. For centuries the convent bells have rung, calling the monks to prayer; and sometimes the walls have trembled with the thunder of cannon; yet the sleepers have not stirred. There they have lain, those stately, royal figures, with hands folded placidly on placid bosoms, resting well after stress and storm.

It was difficult to keep in mind that the real kings and queens had mouldered into dust under the stone where reposed their counterfeit presentments. Again and again we had to send away the impression that we were looking at the actual bodies, transformed by the slow process of centuries into marble, together with their guardian lions, their favourite hounds, and their curly lambs.

The endless slumber of these royal men and women of Savoie seemed magical, mysterious. We felt that, if we but had the secret of the talisman, we could wake them; that they would slowly rise on elbow, and gaze at us, stony-eyed, and reproachful for shattering their dreams.

The murmurous silence of the church whispered broken snatches of their life stories—not that part which we could read in history, or see graven in Latin on their tombs, but that part of which they might choose to dream. Had those knightly men in carven armour loved the marble ladies lying in stately right of possession by their sides, or had their fancy wandered to others whose dust lay now in some far, obscure corner of earth?

If my homage could have compensated in any small degree for kingly unfaith, a drop of balm would have fallen upon the marble heart of each royal lady to whom such injustice had perchance been done; for I loved them all for their noble dignity, and the sweet femininity which remained to them even under the mask of stone. Their names alone warmed the blood with the wine of romance: the Princess Yolande; the Duchess Beatrix; the Lady Melusine. Surely, with such names and such profiles, they had been worth a man's living or dying for; and if life had not been so vivid for me that day, I

should have wished myself back in the far past, in heavy, uncomfortable armour, fighting their battles.

"'Where are all the dear, dead women?'" asked the Boy. "'What's become of all the gold that used to hang, and brush their shoulders?' Maybe part of the answer to Browning's question lies in those tombs."

"They were Princesses, like your sister," said I. "I've been fancying them with her eyes."

"What do you know about her eyes?" he asked quickly.

"I imagine them like yours."

"Let's get out into the sunshine again," said the Boy. "I'm afraid it's time to leave the Princesses, and go back to the Contessa."

CHAPTER XXIV

The Revenge of the Mountain

"Contending with the fretful elements."
—SHAKESPEARE.

IT is the early bird which gathers the worm, if the worm has thoughtlessly got up early too; but it is also the bird which comes flying from afar off, whatever his engagements elsewhere may be; the bird which, having come, remains on the spot favoured by the worm, singing sweet songs to charm it into a mood ripe for the gathering.

Such a bird was Paolo, and such—but perhaps it would be more gallant not to carry the simile further, since even poetry could scarcely license it.

It is enough to say, in proof of the proverb, that when the Boy and I arrived at the villa in time for *déjeuner*, to which I had been invited over night, we found Paolo with Gaetà, under the red umbrella, unencumbered by any irrelevant Barons or Baronesses.

Gaetà was looking pale and a little frightened. Her dimples were in abeyance, as if waiting to learn whether something had happened to twinkle about, or something which would more likely extinguish them forever. But the aëronaut might have invented an air-ship to take the place of ordinary Channel traffic, so great with pride was he. He appeared to have grown several inches in height, and

to have increased considerably in chest measurement, as he sprang from his chair to welcome us, as if we had been long-lost brothers.

"Congratulate me," said he. "The Contessa has just consented to be my wife."

Gaetà clutched the arm of her rustic seat with a tiny hand upon which a new ring glittered, like a new star in the firmament. Her warm dark eyes, eager, expectant, deliciously fearful, were on the Boy. If the discarded favourite of yesterday had leaped to the throat of the accepted lover of to-day (her "Whirlwind"), she would have screamed a silvery little scream and implored him for *her* sake to accept the inevitable calmly; she would have given him a reproachful flash of the eyes, to say, "Why didn't *you* take me, instead of letting him carry me away? What could I do, when you left me alone, at his mercy—I so frail, he so big and strong?" Her glance would then have telegraphed to Paolo, "You have won me and my love; you can afford to spare a defeated rival who is desperate"; and perhaps she might even have thrown me a crumb for auld flirtation's sake.

But the Boy did not, apparently, feel the least magnetic attraction towards Paolo's throat, or any other vulnerable part of the aëronaut's person. Nor did he stamp on the ground, crying upon earth to open and swallow the master of the air. I, too, kept an unmoved front; but then, being English, that might have been pardoned to my national *sang-froid*. There was, however, no such excuse for the mercurial young American, and flat disappointment struck out the spark in Gaetà's eye. The second act of her little drama seemed doomed to failure.

"*Mille congratulations*," said the Boy cordially,

I basely echoing him. We shook hands with Gaetà; we shook hands with Paolo, and something was said about weddings and wedding-cake. Then the Baron and Baronessa appeared so opportunely as to give rise to the base suspicion that they had been eavesdropping. More polite things were mumbled, and we went to luncheon, Gaetà on Paolo's arm, with a disappointed droop of her pretty shoulders. We drank to the health and happiness of the newly affianced pair, a habit which seemed to be growing upon me of late, and might lead me down the fatal grade of bachelordom. The Boy and I were unable to conceal, as we ought to have done out of politeness, the fact that our appetites had sustained the shock of our lady's engagement, and I saw in her eyes that she could never wholly forgive us, no, not even if we made love to her after marriage.

"Shall you take your wedding trip in a balloon?" asked the Boy demurely; and this was the last straw. Gaetà did not make the faintest protest when, soon after, it was announced that he and I thought of leaving Aix on the morrow. I am not sure that she even heard my vague apologies concerning a telegram from friends.

We all went to the opera at one of the Casinos that night. It was "Rigoletto," and Gaetà and Paolo sat side by side, looking into each other's eyes during the love scene in the first act. But the Boy was adamant, and I did not turn a hair. He and I were much occupied in wondering at the strange infatuation of the stage hero, but especially the villain—quite a superior villain—for the heroine, who looked like an elderly papoose: therefore we had no time to be jealous of anything that went on under our noses.

The party supped with me, *en masse,* at my hotel; and afterwards I said good-bye to Gaetà.

She did not know that I had planned my journey with a thought of seeing her at the end, and drowning my sorrows in flirtation; but the Boy knew, and had not forgotten—the little wretch. I saw his thought twinkling in his eyes, as I said debonairly that we might all meet on the Riviera. If I had not sternly removed my gaze, I should probably have burst out laughing, and precipitated a second duel in which I, and not the Boy, would have been a principal.

When I had been in Aix-les-Bains before, I had made the excursion to Mont Revard, as all the world makes it, by the funicular railway; and after half an hour in the little train, I had arrived at the top for lunch and the view, both being enjoyed in a conventional manner. Now, all was to be changed. The Boy and I did not regard ourselves as tourists, but as pilgrims.

Among other things that self-respecting pilgrims cannot do, is to ascend a mountain by means of a funicular railway; better stay at the bottom, and look up with reverence. Therefore, instead of strolling out to the little station about twelve o'clock, with the view of reaching the restaurant on the plateau in time for *déjeuner,* we met on the balcony of the Bristol at seven in the morning. There we fortified ourselves for a long walk, with eggs and *café au lait,* while Innocentina and Joseph grouped the animals at the foot of the steps.

The day was divinely young, and most divinely fair, when we set forth. Only the soft fall of an occasional leaf, weary of keeping up appearances on no visible means of support, told that autumn had

come. The weather put me in mind of a beautiful woman of forty, who can still cheat the world into believing that she is in the full summer of her prime, and is making the most of the few good years left before the crash.

As we struck up the steep hill that leads out of Aix-les-Bains and civilisation, passing with all our little procession into the oak copses which fringe the lower slopes of Mont Revard, the Boy and I agreed that nothing became the town so well as the leaving it behind. At last little Aix unveiled her face to us, as we looked down upon it from airy altitudes. We had space to see how pretty she was, how charmingly she was dressed, and how gracefully she sat in her mountain-backed chair, with her dainty white feet in the lake, which, as Joseph said, we could now follow with our eyes *dans toute son étendue.* A beautiful *étendue* it was, the water keeping its extraordinary brilliance of colour, even in the far distance; vivid in changing blue-greens, flecked with gold, like the spread tail of a peacock burnished by the sun.

Mont Revard is chiselled on the same pattern as all the other mountains, big and little, of this part of Savoie; first, the long, steep slope decently covered with a belt of wood, oak below, and pine above; then a grey, precipitous wall, scarred and furrowed by the frost and storm of a million years or more. This block-and-socket arrangement of Nature is, generally speaking, one of the least interesting of mountain forms, and its crudity was the more noticeable as we were fresh from the soaring pinnacles and stupendous pyramids of Switzerland. But Mont Revard is the perfection of its type; and as we plodded in single file up the threadlike path

wound round the mountain (Joseph and Innocentina in front, driving the animals), my respect for Revard increased with each steeply ascending step.

Aromatic-scented branches brushed our faces, and we had to part them before we could pass on. Then they flew back into their accustomed places, resenting our intrusion by shaking over us a shower of fragrant dew. The path, which was always narrow, had fallen away a little here and there, for it is no one's business to repair it now, since the making of the railway has turned pilgrims into tourists. There was just room for man or beast to walk without danger, but so sheer were the descents below us, so great the drop, that a woman might have been pardoned a few tremors. "It's a good thing you're not a girl," said I to the Little Pal, across my shoulder, holding back a particularly obstinate branch which would have liked to push us over the precipice, with its lean black arm. "You would be screaming, and I shouldn't know what to do for you."

"Not if I were an American girl," he replied, bristling with patriotism.

"Is your sister plucky?"

"As plucky as I am; but perhaps that's not saying much. So you're glad I'm not a girl?"

"I wouldn't metamorphose you, and lose my comrade. Still, if your sister were like you, and not an heiress, I should——"

"You would—what?"

"Like to meet her. But she would probably detest me, and wonder how her brother could have endured my society for weeks on end."

I was looking back, as I spoke, at the Boy, who was close behind, when suddenly his smile seemed

to freeze, and springing forward he caught me by the coat sleeve.

"What's the matter?" I asked, for he was pale under the brown tan.

For an instant he did not answer. Then, with his lips trembling slightly, he smiled again. "I thought you were going to be killed, that's all," said he, "so I stopped you. You were looking back at me, but I saw that—that you were just going to tread on a stone which Fanny had loosened with her hoof as she passed. If you had stepped there, before you could regain your balance, you—but there's no use talking of it. Only do look where you're walking, won't you, when we're on a path like this? Now we can go on."

"Why, you little duffer, you're as white as a ghost!" I exclaimed. "If the stone had slipped I should have jumped back. The path isn't really so narrow. It only gives that effect because it's steep, and hangs over the edge of a precipice. Still, many thanks for your solicitude."

"I believe, after all, I'll have to rest for a minute," the Boy said apologetically. "I feel—a little queer. You needn't wait. I'm sorry you should see me like this. You'll think that there's nothing to choose between me and a girl. But I'm not always a coward."

"I know that well enough," I assured him. "You're not a coward now. But come on. You shall rest when the path widens, where the others are stopping."

I caught his hand to pull him along, since we could not walk abreast, and it was icy cold. Yet it was not for himself that he had feared, and my heart was very warm for the Little Pal, as I steered

him carefully past the loose, flat stone on the edge of the narrow path.

Joseph and Innocentina, who had been driving Finois and Souris, allowing Fanny to follow at will, had called a halt with the three animals, in a green dell where the way widened. The muleteer had a handful of exquisite pink cyclamen, fragrant as violets, which he had been gathering from hidden nooks among the rocks, and he was in the act of presenting the flowers to Innocentina when we arrived, but she waved them aside, exclaiming at her young master's pale face.

The Boy explained that there might have been an accident, owing to Fanny, and the donkey girl broke into violent abuse of the brown velvet creature who was her favourite.

"Daughter of a thrice-accursed mother, and of a despicable race!" she cried in her odd patois, which it was often better not to understand too well. "Blighted and bloodthirsty beast! But look at her now, eating with an enormous appetite a branch as big as herself. Anaconda! She would eat if the world burned. If she had, with a stroke of her twenty times condemned hoof, hurled us all to death on the rocks below, she would still eat, not even looking over the cliff to see what had become of us."

"But you should not talk so," broke in Joseph, lover of animals. "It was not the fault of the little *âne* that the stone was loosened. How could she know? It is you who are hard of heart, to turn upon her thus. It is because you are Catholic, and believe that the beasts have no souls."

"It is better to have none than to be a heretic, and the soul burn," retorted Innocentina. "I am not hard-hearted. I love my young Monsieur, and

would not see him injured, that is all; while you care for nothing in the world so much as your old Finois. Ah, I would I had the *insouciance* of the *ânes*. It is after all that which keeps them young."

At this we laughed, which annoyed Innocentina so much that she at once fed to the maligned Fanny a bunch of charming yellow-pink mushrooms which my prophetic soul told me had been originally intended for her master's lunch.

Fortunately for us, Joseph—sadly wearing in his buttonhole the despised cyclamen—discovered a few more of these agreeable little vegetables, which he tested for our benefit by drawing his sturdy thumb-nail along the stem, showing how the fluted under-surface flushed red at the touch, while the blood flowed carmine from the wound he made.

A short rest brought the colour back to the Boy's lips, but we did not go on again until we had eaten some of the chicken sandwiches which had been put up for me at the hotel. Climbing had made us hungry, although we had not been three hours on the way. And we had left the summer behind, on lower levels; we did not need to remind ourselves now that it was autumn. By noon we were *en route* again, but the brilliance of the day had gone. As we looked back at the world we were leaving, serrated mountains were dark against flying silver clouds, and when we neared the Col, a fierce north wind, which had been lying in wait for us above, swooped down like a great bird of prey. We had heard it shrieking from afar, but now we had penetrated into its very eyrie; and as we crept, like flies upon a wall, along the tiny path which merely roughened the sheer rock precipice, the wind caught and clawed us with savage glee.

For a wonder, the much-travelled Joseph had never before made the ascent of Mont Revard, therefore a certain pioneer instinct on which I pride myself, and yesterday's research in the admirable map of the Ministry of the Interior, alone gave us guidance. I did not see how we could have come wrong, yet each moment it appeared that our neglected path had reached its end, like an unwound tape-measure. Could it be possible that this broken, ill-mended thread was the clue which would eventually lead us to the Col de Pertuiset, and the châlet-hotel far away upon the summit of the mountain?

The Boy and I were ahead now, I sheltering him slightly from the cold blast with my body, as I walked before him. Presently the way turned abruptly, to zig-zag up a gap in the rock face, and I shouted a warning to Joseph to look after Innocentina and the animals, so steep and ruinous was the path. But I need not have been alarmed. A backward glance showed me that Joseph had anticipated my instructions, so far as Innocentina was concerned.

Not a word of complaint came from the Boy; indeed, it would have been difficult for him to utter it, even if he would, with the wind rudely pressing its seal upon his lips. But I held out a hand to him, and though he rebelled at first, an instant's silent tussle made me master of his, so that I could pull him up with little effort on his part.

In the deep gullies and hollows of this chasm below the Col, the wind had us at its mercy, and forced our breath down our throats. We were in deep shadow, though the sun should have been not far past the zenith, and looking up to learn the reason, we saw that a huge bank of woolly mist hung

grey and heavy between us and the sky. Below—far, far below—we had a glimpse of the world we had left still bathed in September sunshine, warm and beautiful, with cloud-shadows flying over low grass mountains and distant lakes. Then we seemed to knock our heads against a dull grey ceiling, which noiselessly crumbled round us, and we were in the mist.

No longer was it a ceiling, but a sea in which we swam; a sea so cold that a shiver crept through our bones into our marrow. We had escaped the clutches of the wind, to drown in fog, and in five minutes I had beside me a small, ghostly form with frosted hair, and a white rime on his jacket. The Boy was like a figure on a great iced cake, for the ground was whitened too.

Luckily, the ascent was over, and we were on grassy, undulating land where stunted trees stood here and there like pointing wraiths in the misty gloom. Dimly I could see, now and then, a daub of paint, red as a splash of blood, on a dark boulder, to guide travellers towards the summit hotel. Had it not been for these, it would have been impossible to find the way, or keep it if found.

We could walk side by side here, and looking down at the Boy, I could see that he was shivering.

"Can it be that a few hours ago the mere exertion of walking made us so hot that we had to mop our foreheads, and fan ourselves with our hats?" I asked.

"Let's talk about it," said the Boy. "It may warm us, just to remember."

"Are you very cold?"

"Not so ve-r-y."

"Your teeth are chattering in your head. Stop, we'll have our overcoats out of the packs."

"I don't want mine."

"Nonsense; you must have it."

"To tell the truth, I haven't got it with me. I gave it to the upstairs waiter at Chamounix. He told me a lot about himself, and he was in trouble, poor fellow; he'd been discharged for some fault or other, and was so poor that he was going to walk home, in the farthest part of Switzerland. You see, I thought as I was on the way south, I wouldn't need an overcoat. I'd hardly ever wanted it so far, and the waiter was a small, slim chap, not much bigger than I am. Anyhow, we shall soon be at the hotel now, and we can walk fast."

He looked so white and spirit-like in the mist, with his big bright eyes made brighter by the tired shadows underneath, that I would not discourage him with the truth. If I had said that I feared we were lost in the mist, and perhaps might not reach the hotel for hours, he would have realised all his weariness and suffering. I made him wait, however, and when the ghostly procession of man, woman, and beasts had trailed up to us, I ordered a stop for Finois to be unloaded, that my overcoat might be unearthed.

In place of the workmanlike pack which the mule might have borne, had I not insisted on fulfilling a rash vow, my luggage was contained in twin brown hold-alls bought at Martigny, and covered with a waterproof cloth which was the property of Joseph.

Both these abominable rolls had to be taken off Finois' back and laid upon the whitened grass, as I had forgotten in which one was stuffed the coat that I had not worn for many days. Now at this bitter

moment, could my valet but have known it, he had his full revenge. I longed for him as a thirsty traveller in the desert longs for a spring of water. Yet I knew, deep down in my desolate heart, that Locker would not have been able to cope with this crisis. In cities, he was more efficient than most of his kind, but the Unusual was a bugbear to him; and, lost in a freezing mountain mist, he would have lain down to die with my horrible hold-alls still strapped and bulging. It is a strange thing that most servants would consider themselves deeply injured if asked to bear half the hardships which their masters cheerfully undergo for the sheer fun of the thing.

Joseph came to my rescue, but, with all the good will in the world, he complicated matters. Finois, Fanny, and Souris pressed nearer, hoping for something to eat, and the two donkeys, discouraged and disheartened by the unexpected cold, were piteous, shivering objects, with their velvet hair bristling on end, their little legs knocking together. Even their faces seemed to have shrunk, and Fanny was all eyes and grey spectacles.

I opened the hateful object which, by its tuberculous knobs, I recognised as the one least often unpacked. It was there that I expected to find the coat, wrapped democratically round goodness knew how many spare boots, stockings, collars, and other small articles which Locker would never have allowed to come within speaking distance of each other. But, with the total depravity of inanimate things, the coat had escaped from the hold-all. In my certainty that I must come upon it sooner or later—at the bottom of everything, of course—I scattered the other contents recklessly about; and when at last I gave up the search in despair, the

white ground was strewn with the most intimate accessories of my toilet. Seized with a Berserker rage, I tore open the second hold-all, and before the Boy could utter a cry of protest, more collars, handkerchiefs, brushes, and little horrors of every description peppered the earth. There were as many things there as the inestimable mother of the Swiss Family Robinson contrived to stow in her wonderful bag during the five minutes before the shipwreck—things which fulfilled all the wants of the young Robinsons for the period of seventeen years. But, naturally, the one thing I needed was missing; and now that it was too late, I vaguely recalled seeing that overcoat hanging limply on a peg in the wardrobe of some hotel whose very name I had now forgotten.

If I had been a woman, I should inevitably have burst into tears, and somebody would have comforted me, and everything would immediately have been all right. As it was, I used several of Innocentina's most lurid phrases, under my breath, and announced my intention of abandoning my luggage on the mountain-side, rather than attempt the impossible task of feeding it again to the monsters which had disgorged it.

"Poor Man!" exclaimed the Boy. "Why didn't you confide to me before, that you were physically and mentally incapable of packing? I've often noticed that your hold-alls looked like overfed boa constrictors, but I didn't dream things were as bad as this. You had better let Innocentina and me do the work for you. We're what you call 'nailers' at it, I assure you."

I made a snatch at a dressing-gown, which I rescued from the conglomerate heap before he could

push me away. Then, with the garment hung over my arm, I stood by helplessly with Joseph, while Innocentina and the Boy, with incredible swiftness and skill, set about the business from which I had been dismissed. Somewhat after this fashion must the work of Creation have been done, when there was only Chaos to begin upon.

In five minutes all my scattered horrors had been sorted neatly, according to their species, like the animals forming in procession for the ark; collars after their kind; boots after their kind; and so on, down to the humble shoestring and mean shirt-stud. Never had those loathsome inventions of an evil mind, my hold-alls, so closely resembled self-respecting members of the luggage fraternity as they did when the Boy and Innocentina had finished with them.

With a sigh of relief the Little Pal jumped up from his grim task, leaving Joseph to fasten the straps; and as he got to his feet, his small hands purple with cold, I wrapped the dressing-gown round his shoulders. Then, seeing his slight figure engulfed in it, like a very small pea in a very big pod, I burst out laughing.

"Is *that* what you wanted?" cried the Boy. "I won't have it. I won't! I'd rather freeze than be a guy. Put it on yourself."

"I don't need it. It was for you. Don't be ungrateful, after all my trouble."

"All *my* trouble, you mean. Take off the horrid thing. I won't wear it. Let me alone."

Unmoved by his complaints, I still held him prisoner, using the dressing-gown as a strait-jacket, while he fought in my grasp. A sudden suppressed giggle from Innocentina at this juncture seemed to drive him to frenzy.

"If you don't let me go, I'll—I'll box your ears!" he stammered.

"Try it," I advised sternly.

He could not move his arms, so closely I held him, but his eyes were blazing.

"You'll be sorry for this some day," he panted.

"Will you keep on the dressing-gown, if I let you go?"

"No."

"Then will you wear my coat?"

"What! And have you in your shirt-sleeves? Rather not. Let me——"

"I'll give you the coat and wear the dressing-gown myself. *I'm* not as vain as a girl."

Whether the thought of what my appearance would be in the gown, or the taunt I flung at him, moved the Boy, I cannot say, but suddenly his struggles ceased.

"I'll wear anything you like," said he with a sudden accession of meekness, so unexpected that I was alarmed for his health, and gazed at him closely to see if he were on the verge of a collapse. Instead of looking ill, however, he was no longer pinched and pallid, but radiant with colour. Rage had produced a beneficial effect upon his circulation.

On his promise, I released him, nor did I insist when he waved me aside, and hurriedly girded up the dressing-gown himself. The garment reached almost to his feet, and the quaintness of the little figure shrouded in its dark folds and hatted with Panama straw, in the midst of a mountain snow-cloud, was a sight to make Fanny laugh; but I kept a grave face, and so did Joseph and Innocentina, though the donkey-girl's eyes were bright.

We marched on again when Finois had been reloaded, the party keeping well together, lest we should lose each other in this mist which was snow, this snow which was mist. The Boy and I walked ahead at first; I silent lest I should laugh, he silent —probably—lest he should cry. The woolly cloud wrapped its folds round us thicker and closer, so that objects a dozen feet away were blotted out of sight, and for all practical purposes ceased to exist. The silvery rime, freezing as it fell, covered stones and boulders so that it was no longer possible to see the red splashes which marked the way. Soon, we were hopelessly lost, plunging down into grassy hollows, where our feet slipped between rough stones into muddy ruts concealed under a treacherous film of white, or plodding up to the top of knolls which proved to have no connection with anything else, when we had toilsomely attained them.

By-and-bye I knew how a man feels in a treadmill, and I was anxious for the Boy's sake, seeing the queer little figure in the panama and dressing-gown gradually droop, despite the brave spirit with which it was animated. Losing confidence in my boasted ability as a pioneer, I called Joseph to the rescue, and bade him take the lead.

Having intruded upon him suddenly, behind the screen of snow-cloud, I found him engaged in the Samaritan act—no doubt carried out on purely humanitarian principles—of warming one of Innocentina's hands in his. I simulated blindness with such histrionic skill that honest Joseph was deceived thereby; but not so Innocentina. She tossed her head, and folded her arms in her cape as if it had been the toga of a Roman senator unjustly accused of treason. She had been, so she assured me, at that

instant on the point of coming forward to entreat her young monsieur to mount Fanny, since he must be deadly tired; but the Boy, joining us at the moment, denied excessive fatigue and said that he would freeze if he rode. Besides, he added, it would be cruel to burden Fanny, in her present state of depression. The most likely thing was that we should have to carry her; and if she continued to shrink at her present rate per minute, soon we could slip her into one of our pockets.

Joseph, promoted to the post of honour, forged ahead; and either Fanny and Souris insisted upon following Finois, or else Innocentina felt called upon to continue the process of conversion even in adverse circumstances; at all events, the Boy and I almost immediately found ourselves in the background, all that we could see of our companions being a tassel-like grey tail quivering above a moving blur of little legs, scarcely thicker than toothpicks.

The Boy, who was still sulking in the dressing-gown, suddenly broke by a spasmodic chuckle the silence which had blended chillingly with the weather.

"What's up?" I enquired, thawing joyously in the brief gleam of moral sunshine.

"I was only thinking that if Innocentina wants to convert Joseph from heresy she'd better not lecture him to-day about eternal fire. The idea is too inviting. I never envied anyone so much as my namesake, St. Laurence, on his gridiron. It would be a luxury to grill."

"Perhaps the gridiron was to him what my dressing-gown is to you," said I.

"I'm getting resigned to it. That's the reason I'm talking to you. I hated you for five minutes;

but—you never like people so much as when you've just finished hating them."

"Which means that I'm forgiven?"

"That, and something more."

"Good Imp! The thermometer is rising. But I feel a beast to have got you into this scrape. If it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have known that a mule-path existed on Mont Revard."

"I'm not sorry we came. This will be something to remember always. It's a real adventure. Afterwards we shall get the point of view."

"I wish we could get one now," said I. "But the prospect isn't cheerful. Molly Winston's prophecy is being fulfilled. She was certain that sooner or later I should be lost on a mountain; and her sketch of me, curled up in sleeping-sack and tent, toasting my toes before a fire of twigs, and eating tinned soup, steaming hot, made me long to lose myself immediately. But, alas! a peasant child near Piedimulera is basking at this moment in my woolly sack, and battening on my Instantaneous Breakfasts."

"Don't think of them," said the Boy. "That way madness lies. A chapter in my book shall be called, 'How to be Happy though Freezing.'"

"What would be your definition of the state, precisely?"

"Being with Somebody you—like."

My temperature bounded up several degrees, thanks to these amends, but our sole comfort was in each other, since Joseph had no hope to give. At this moment he parted the mist-curtain to remark that he could find no traces of a path or landmark of any kind.

Hours dragged on, and we were still wandering aimlessly, as one wanders in a troubled dream. We

were chilled to the bone, and as it was by this time late in the afternoon, I began to fear that we should have to spend the night on the mountain-side. Revard was wreaking vengeance upon us for taking his name in vain. We had made naught of him as a mountain; now he was showing us that, were he sixteen thousand feet high instead of four, he could scarcely put us to more serious inconvenience.

I was growing gravely anxious about the Boy, though the bitter cold and great fatigue had not quenched his spirit, when the smell of cattle and the muffled sound of human voices put life into the chill, dead body of the mist. A house loomed before us, and I sprang to the comforting conclusion that we had stumbled upon one of the outlying offices of the hotel, but an instant showed me my mistake. The low building was a rough stone châlet with two or three cowherds outside the door, and these men stared in surprise and curiosity at our ghostly party.

"Are we far from the hotel?" I asked in French, but no gleam of understanding lightened their faces; and it was not until Joseph had addressed them in the most extraordinary patois I had ever heard, that they showed signs of intelligence. "Hoo-a-long, hoo-a-long, walla-ha?" he remarked, or words to that effect.

"Squall-a-doo, soo-a-lone, bolla-hang," returned one of the men, suddenly wound up to gesticulate with violence.

"He says that the hotel is about half an hour's walk from here," Joseph explained to me, looking wistful. And my own feelings gave me the clue to that look's significance.

"Thank goodness!" I exclaimed heartily. "But it would be tempting Providence to pass this house,

which is at least a human habitation, without resting and warming the blood in our veins. Perhaps we can get something to eat for ourselves and the donkeys—to say nothing of something to drink."

Another exchange of words like brickbats afforded us the information, when translated, that we could obtain black bread, cheese, and brandy; also that we were welcome to sit before the fire.

I pushed the Boy in ahead of me, but he fell back. The stench which struck us in the face as the door opened was like an evil-smelling pillow, thrown with good aim by an unseen hand. Mankind, dog-kind, cow-kind, chicken-kind, and cheese-kind, together with many ingredients unknown to science, combined in the making of this composite odour, and its strength sent the Boy reeling into my arms.

"No, I can't stand it," he gasped. "I shall faint. Better freeze than suffocate."

But I forced him in; and in five minutes, to our own self-loathing, we had become almost inured to the smell. Eat we could not, but we drank probably the worst brandy in all Europe or Asia, and slowly our blood began once more to take its normal course. A spurious animation soon enabled the Boy to start on again; one of the cowherds pointed out the path, and for a time all went well with our little band, even Fanny and Souris having revived on black crusts of mediæval bread. But the half-hour in which we had been told we might cover the distance between châlet and hotel lengthened into an hour. The mist grew greyer, and thicker, and darker, misleading us almost as cleverly as its sophisticated English cousin, a London fog. Again and again we lost our way. Owing to the fatigue of the Boy and Innocentina, and the utter dejection of the unfortu-

nate little donkeys, we could not walk fast enough to keep our blood warm, and my tweeds, in which I was buttoned to the chin, seemed to afford no more protection than newspaper.

When I remarked this to the Boy he replied with a faint chuckle that he felt like a newspaper himself —"a newspaper," he repeated, shivering, "with the smallest circulation in the world. And if it weren't for your dressing-gown there wouldn't be any circulation left at all."

The day, which had begun in summer and ended in winter, was darkening to night when Joseph, who was in advance, cried out that he had flattened his nose against something solid, which was probably the wall of the hotel. No blur of yellow light penetrated the gloom, but a few minutes of anxious groping brought us to a door—rather an elaborate, pretentious door, which instantly dispelled all fear that we had come upon another châlet, or perchance a barn.

CHAPTER XXV

The Americans

"Is the gentleman anonymous? Is he a great unknown?"
—SHAKESPEARE.

WHILE Joseph and Innocentina remained outside with the animals, the Boy and I entered a long, dark corridor, dimly lighted at the far end. Half-way down we came upon a porter, whose look of surprise would have told us (if we had not learned through bitter experience already) that Mont Revard's season was over. He guided us to the door of a large salon, which he threw open with an air of wishing to justify the hotel; and despite the load of weariness under which the Boy was almost fainting, he whipped the dressing-gown off in a flash, shook the snow from his panama, squaring his little shoulders, and re-entered civilisation with a jauntiness which denied exhaustion and did credit to his pride. Nevertheless, he availed himself of the first easy-chair, and dropped into it as a ripe apple drops from its leafy home into the long grass.

The porter scampered off to send us the landlord, and to see to the comfort of Joseph and Innocentina, until they and their charges could be definitely provided for. While we waited—the Boy leaning back, pale and silent, in an exaggerated American rocking-chair, I standing on guard beside him—there was time to look about at our surroundings.

The room was immense, and on a warm, bright day of midsummer might have been delightful, with its polished mosaic floor, its painted basket chairs and little tables, and its standard lamps with coloured silk shades. But to-day a stuffy, red-curtained bar-parlour would have been more cheerful.

At first, I thought we were alone in the waste of painted wicker-work, for there had been dead silence on our entrance; but hardly had we settled ourselves to await the coming of the landlord, when a movement at the far end of the big, dim room told me that it had other occupants. Two men in knickerbockers were sitting on low chairs drawn close to a fireplace, and both were looking round at us with evident curiosity.

As the Boy's chair had its high back half-turned in their direction, all they could see of him was a little hand dangling over the arm of the chair, and a small foot in a stout, workmanlike walking boot, laced far up the ankle. I stood facing them; and though the sole illumination came flickering from a newly kindled fire, or filtered through the red shades of three large lamps, not only could they see what manner of man I was, but I could study their personal characteristics.

In these I was conscious of no lively interest; but as the men continued to gaze over their shoulders at me, and the Boy's chair, I decided that they were from the States. They were both young, clean-shaven, good-looking; with clear features, keen eyes, and prominent chins, reminiscent of the attractive "Gibson type" of American youth.

"Well," said one to the other, turning away from his brief but steady inspection of the newcomers, "I thought we were the only two fools stranded here

for the night in this weather, but it seems there are a couple more."

Their voices had a carrying quality which brought the words distinctly to our ears. Suddenly the "rocker" was agitated, and the Boy's feet came to the ground. Nervously, he jerked the chair round so that its back was completely turned to the men at the other end of the room. His eyes looked so big, and his face was so deeply stained with a quick rush of colour, that I feared he was ill.

"Anything wrong?" I asked, bending towards him, with my hand on his chair.

"Nothing. I was only—a little surprised to hear people talking, that's all. I thought we had the room to ourselves."

His voice was a whisper, and I pitched mine to his in answering. "So did I at first, but it seems two countrymen of yours are before us. I wonder if they have had adventures to equal ours? Probably we shall find out at dinner, for this looks the sort of hotel to herd its guests together at one long table."

The Boy's hand closed sharply on the arm of his chair. "I'm too tired to dine in public," said he, still in the same muffled voice. "I shall have something to eat in my room—if I ever get one."

"If that's your game," said I, "I'll play it with you. We'll ask them to give us a sitting-room of sorts, and we'll dine there together like kings."

"No, no. You must go down. I shall have my dinner in bed. I'm worn out. What are—those men at the other end of the room like?"

"Like sketches from New York *Life*," I replied. "One is dark, the other fair, with a deep cleft in his chin, and a nose so straight it might

have been ruled. Better take a look at them. Perhaps you may have met at home."

"All the more reason for not looking," said the Boy. "Thank goodness, here comes the landlord."

We could have had twenty rooms if we wished, for, said our host, throwing a glance across the salon, he had only two other guests besides ourselves. They had come up by the funicular, meaning to walk next morning down to Chambéry, but whether they could do so or not depended on the weather. In any case, the hotel would close for the season in a few days now, and the funicular cease to run. Fires should be laid in our rooms immediately, and we should be made comfortable, but as for our animals, unfortunately there were no stables attached to the hotel, no accommodation whatever for four-footed creatures. They would have to go back to the châlet, where they and their drivers could be put up for the night.

"That will not do for Innocentina," exclaimed the boy quickly. In his eagerness he raised his voice slightly, and the two young men at the other end of the salon seemed waked suddenly to renewed interest in us and our affairs. But the Boy's tone fell again instantly. "Innocentina must have a room at this hotel," he went on. "The châlet will be bad enough for Joseph. For her it would be impossible. Joseph won't mind taking the donkeys down and caring for them this one night, for Innocentina's sake."

"If I know Joseph, it will afford him infinite satisfaction; and the more intense his physical suffering, the happier he'll be in the thought that he is bearing it for her," I replied. "I'll go out and break the news to the poor chap."

The Boy sprang up. "No, no; don't leave me

alone!" he cried. Then, as I looked surprised, he added, more quietly: "I mean I'll go with you, and talk to Innocentina. Meanwhile, our things can be sent up to our rooms."

Though he had asked "what the men at the other end of the room were like," he showed no desire to verify for himself the description I had given. He kept his back religiously turned towards his countrymen, and did not throw a single glance their way as we left the salon with the landlord, though I saw that the two young Americans were interested in him.

We returned to the door at the end of the long corridor, where we had entered the hotel ten or fifteen minutes earlier, and found Joseph, Innocentina, and the animals still sheltering against the house wall. The porter had already retailed the bad news, and the faithful muleteer had of his own accord volunteered to play the part which the Boy and I had assigned him. Though he was tired, cold, and hungry, and had the prospect of a gloomy walk, with a night of discomfort to follow, he was far from being depressed; and I thought I knew what supported him in his hour of trial.

We saw him off, followed by a piteous trail of asshood, and then, shivering once more, we reentered the dim corridor. Innocentina, much subdued, was with us now, carrying the famous bag in its snow-powdered *rücksack*, while a porter went before with the rest of the luggage, taken from the tired backs of our beasts. We had reached the foot of the stairs, when we came so suddenly face to face with the two Americans that it almost seemed we had stumbled upon an ambush.

They stared very hard at the Boy, who did not

give them a glance, though I was conscious of a stiffening of his muscles. He turned his head a little on one side, so that the shadow of the panama eclipsed his face from their point of view; but I could see that he had first grown scarlet, then white.

"By Jove, but it can't be possible!" I heard one of the men say as we passed and began to ascend the stairs. The answer I did not hear; but Innocentina, who was close behind me, glared with unchristian malevolence at the young men, as if instinct whispered that they were concerning themselves unnecessarily about her master's business.

The Boy ran upstairs as lightly as if he had never known fatigue. The porter showed him his room; his luggage was taken in, and then he came out to me in the passage.

"You told Joseph that he needn't come up very early to-morrow, didn't you?" he enquired.

"Yes, as we're pretty well fagged, and Chambéry isn't an all-day's journey, I thought we might take our time in the morning. That suits you, doesn't it?" (It was really of him that I had been thinking, but I did not say so.)

"Oh, yes," he answered absentmindedly, as if already his brain were busy with something else. "What time did you fix for starting? I didn't hear."

"I said to Joseph that it would do if he were on hand at half-past ten. You can rest till nine o'clock."

"Thank you. And now, good night. You've been very kind to-day. Maybe I didn't seem grateful, but I was, all the same; very, very grateful."

"Nonsense!" said I. "If you're too tired to go down, shan't I have my dinner with you? We could

have a table drawn up before the fire, and it would be quite jolly."

He shook his head, a great weariness in his eyes. "I'm too done up for society, even yours. I'd rather you went down. You will, won't you?"

"Certainly, if you won't have me. Rest well. I shall see that they send you up something decent."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not as hungry as I was, somehow. Good night, Man."

"Good night, Boy."

"Shake hands, will you?"

He pressed mine with all his little force, and shook it again and again, looking up in my face. Then he bade me "Good night" once more, abruptly, and retreated into his room.

I went to my quarters at the other end of the passage, and was glad of the fire which had begun to roar fiercely in a small round stove, like a gnome with a pipe growing out of his head. I had a sponge, changed, and descended to the salon, only to learn that the eating arrangements were carried on in another building, at some distance from the hotel. Feeling like a belated insect of summer overtaken by winter cold, I darted down the path indicated, to the restaurant, where I found the Americans, already seated at just such a long table as I had pictured, and still in their knickerbockers. There was, in the big room, a sprinkling of little tables under the closed windows, but they were not laid for a meal; and a chair being pulled out for me by a waiter, exactly opposite my two fellow-guests, I took it and sat down.

My first thought was to order something for the Little Pal, and to secure a promise that it should reach him hot, and soon. I then devoted myself to

my own dinner, which would have been more enjoyable had I had the Boy's companionship. I had worked slowly through soup and fish, and arrived at the inevitable veal, when I was addressed by one of the Americans—him of the cleft chin and light curly hair, whose voice I had heard first in the salon.

"You came up by the mule path, didn't you?"

I answered civilly in the affirmative, aware that all my "points" were being noted by both men.

"Must have been a stiff journey in this weather."

"We came into the mist and snow just below the Col."

"Your friend is done up, isn't he?"

"Oh, he's a very plucky young chap," I replied, careful for the Boy's reputation as a pilgrim; "but he's a bit fagged, and will be better off dining in his own room."

"I expect he'll be all right to-morrow. Are you going to try and get to Chambéry, or will you return to Aix by train?"

"We shall push on, unless we're snowed in," I said.

"That's our plan, too. I dare say we shall be starting about the same time, and if so, if you don't mind, we might join forces."

"Now, what is this chap's game?" I asked myself. "He isn't drawing me out for nothing; and as these two are together they have no need of companionship. There's some special reason why they want to join us."

Taking this for granted, the one reason which occurred to me as probable, was a previous acquaintance with the Boy, which they wished to keep up, and he did not wish to acknowledge. I deter-

mined that he should not be thus entrapped, through me.

"That would be very pleasant, no doubt," I replied; "but you had better not wait for us. Our time of starting is uncertain."

Though I spoke with perfect civility, it must have been clear to them that I preferred not to have my party enlarged by strangers, and I rather regretted the necessity for this ungraciousness, as the men were gentlemen, and I usually got on excellently with Americans.

"Oh, very well," returned the handsomer of the two, looking slightly offended. "We shall meet on the way down, perhaps. By-the-by, if I'm not mistaken, your young friend is a compatriot of ours. He's American, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I believe I've met him in New York, though it was so dark I couldn't be sure. Do you object to telling me his name?'

"I'm afraid I do object," I answered, stiffly this time. "You must satisfy yourself as to his identity, if it interests you, when you see each other to-morrow."

Of all that remained of dinner, I can only say the words which Hamlet spoke in dying; for indeed, "the rest was silence."

Directly the meal was over, I hurried back to the hotel, like a rabbit to its warren; smoked a pipe before a roaring fire in my bedroom, and wondered if the Little Pal were wandering "down the uncompanioned way" of dreamland. As for me, I never got as far as that land. I fell over a precipice without a bottom, before my head had found a nest in the soft pillow, and knew nothing more until

suddenly I started awake with the impression that someone had called.

"What is it, Boy? Do you want me?" I heard myself asking sharply, as my eyes opened.

It seemed that I had not been asleep for ten minutes, but to my surprise an exquisite, rosy light filled the room. Well-nigh before I knew whether I were sleeping or waking, I was out of bed and at the window.

It was the light of sunrise, shining over a billowy white world, for the fog had been rent asunder, and through its torn, woolly folds, I caught an unforgettable glimpse of glory. The sky was a rippling lake of red-gold fire, whose reflection turned a hundred snow-clad mountain-crests to blazing helmets for Titans. Above the majestic ranks rose their leader, towering head and shoulders over all. "Mont Blanc!" I had just time to say to myself in awed admiration, when the snow-fog was knit together again, only a jagged line of fading gold showing the stitches.

Nobody had called me; I knew that, now, yet I had an uneasy impression that someone wanted me somewhere, and that something was wrong. It was stupid to let this worry me, I told myself, however; and having lingered a few moments at the window studying the lovely pattern of frost-work lace on the glass, and the fringe of priceless pearls on branch of bush, and stunted tree, I went back to bed. There, I pulled my watch out from under my pillow, and looked at it. "Only six o'clock," I yawned. "Three good hours more of sleep. I wonder if the Boy——" Then I tumbled over another pleasant precipice.

When I waked again, it was almost nine, and

nerving myself to the inevitable, I rang for a cold bath. The morning was bitterly chill, but the tingling water soon sent the blood racing through my veins, and by ten o'clock I was knocking at the Boy's door. No answer came, and thinking that he must already be down, I was on my way across the white, frozen grass to the restaurant, when I met the muleteer coming up with Finois.

"Hallo, Joseph!" I exclaimed in surprise. "Where are Fanny and Souris?"

"Innocentina has taken them, Monsieur," he answered.

"What—they have started?"

"But yes, Monsieur, and very early."

"Tell me what happened," I prompted him.

"Why, Monsieur, it was this way. There was not much sleep for me last night, if you will pardon my liberty in mentioning such matters, because of the little animal which bites and jumps away. I know not what you call him in your language, though I think he is known in all lands. Besides, the beasts were noisy in the stable underneath the room where I lay with the men. About half-past four the others got up, but I lay still, as it was well with my animals, and there was no hurry. But a little more than an hour later, they called me from below, laughing, and saying there was a lady to see me. I had not undressed, Monsieur, for many reasons, and now I was glad, for I knew who it must be, though not why she should be there, and so early too. I could not bear that she should be alone with these rough fellows, and in two minutes I had tumbled down the ladder.

"I had not been mistaken, Monsieur. It was Innocentina. She said her master had sent her

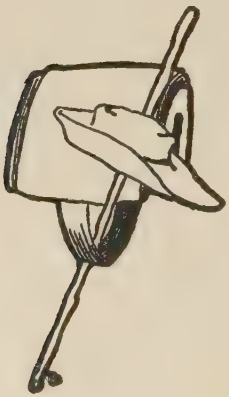
down to fetch the *ânes,* as he was obliged by certain circumstances to start on in advance of my master. I did not ask her any questions, but I helped her get ready the donkeys, and I would have walked up with her to the hotel, had she permitted it. If I did so, she said, the cattle men would talk; so I stayed behind."

"Well, I suppose we shall overtake them," I replied, hiding surprise, as I did not care to let Joseph see that I had been left in the dark concerning this strange change of programme. My mind groped for an explanation of the mystery, and then suddenly seized upon one. The Boy, who had evidently met his two compatriots in other days and another land, disliked and wished to shun them. He had feared that they might be our companions down to Chambéry, and had taken drastic measures to avoid their society. Rather than get me up early, for his convenience, after a day of some hardship and fatigue, the plucky little chap had gone off without us. Possibly I should find that he had left a note for me, with some waiter or *femme de chambre.* If not, our route down to Chambéry and the hotel at which we were to stay there, had already been decided upon. He would have said to himself that there could be no mistake, and that he might trust me to find him at our destination.

The Americans were not at breakfast, but later, as Joseph, Finois, and I were starting, I saw them standing at a distance in the corridor. The porter, who had brought down the miserable hold-alls, and was waiting for his tip, murmured that *"ces messieurs"* were not going to make the walking expedition to Chambéry; the landlord had advised them that the weather was too bad, and they

had decided to return by the noon train to Aix-les-Bains.

I felt that I owed the young men a grudge for the Boy's defection; and as there had been no note or message from him, I was not in a forgiving mood. Without a second glance towards the pair, I walked away with Joseph—alone with him for the first time in many a day.



CHAPTER XXVI

The Vanishing of the Prince

"Now to my word;
It is, *Adieu, adieu! remember me.*"
—SHAKESPEARE.

As we dipped down below the summit of the mountain, we stepped from under the snow-fog, as if it had been a great white, hanging nightcap. The air smelled like early winter, and was vibrant with the melody of cowbells. On snow-covered eminences near and far, dark, sentinel larches watched us, weeping slow tears from every naked spine. So high had they climbed, so acclimatised to the mountains did these soldier-trees seem, that I named them for myself the Chasseurs Alpins of the forest.

"We shall have fine weather to-morrow," said Joseph, as we left the snow and came to what he called the "*terre grasse,*" which was greasy and slippery under foot. "See, Monsieur, a worm; he comes up out of his hole, and the earth clings to him as he walks abroad. If he were clean, that would be a sign of another bad day to follow."

"At least we are going down to summer again," I replied; "also to the young Monsieur; and to Innocentina. But perhaps you are glad of a rest from her sharp tongue."

Joseph shrugged his shoulders. "I am used to it now, Monsieur," said he; and I turned away my face to hide a smile. I knew that he missed the girl,

and I was still more keenly aware that I missed a comrade. My fleeting impressions were hardly worth catching and taming, without him to help cage them; without his vivid mind to help colour the thoughts, which mine only sketched in black and white, it was easier to leave the canvas blank.

We had decided last night that it would not be wise to attempt the journey by way of the Dent du Nivolets, as it was on a higher level than the summit of Mont Revard, and we should risk being again extinguished under a nightcap of snow. We descended, therefore, by the simpler and shorter route, but it was full of interest for the strangeness of the landscape, and the buildings which we reached on lower planes.

The houses were no longer characteristically French, but a bastard Swiss. The heavy, overhanging roofs were thatched, and of enormous thickness; the walls of grey stone, with roughly carved, skeleton balconies. The peasants no longer smiled at us in good-natured curiosity, but regarded us dourly, though they were gravely civil if we had questions to ask.

Although I gave Joseph no instructions, and he made no suggestions, by common consent we hastened on as if a prize were to be bestowed for our good speed, at the end of the journey. On other days we had sauntered, allowing the animals to snatch delicious *hors d'œuvres* from the bushes as they passed, but to-day Finois was in the depths of gloom. There was no grey Souris, no spectacled Fanny-anny to cheer him on the way, and if he reached out a wistful mouth towards a branch, he was hurried past it. How would we feel, I asked myself, if, with the inner man clamouring, we

were driven remorselessly along a road decked on either side with exquisitely appointed tables, set out with all our favourite dishes, to be had for nothing —never once allowed to stop for a crumb of *pâté de foie gras,* or a bit of chicken in aspic? Yet asking myself this, I had no mercy on Finois.

We stopped for lunch at a queer auberge, in an abortive village appropriately named Les Déserts, where the highroad for Chambéry began. An outer room roughly flagged with stone, was kitchen, nursery, and family living-room in one. It swarmed with children, and was presided over by two of Macbeth's witches, who were not separated from their cauldrons. I took them to be rival mothers-in-law, and they could have taught Innocentina some choice new expressions valuable to test upon donkeys or other heretics; but they sent me a steaming bowl of excellent coffee, when I half expected poison; fried me a couple of eggs with crisp brown lace round the edges, and took for my benefit, from one of the shelves that lined the nursery wall, the newest of a hundred loaves of hard black bread.

I ventured to ask a down-trodden daughter-in-law of the Ladies of the Cauldrons, whether a very young gentleman, and an older but still all-young woman, with two donkeys, had stopped at the auberge some hours earlier.

The spiritless one shook her head. But no. The only other customers of the house thus far had been the postman and two soldiers. The party might have passed. She and her parents were too busy to take note of what went on outside. A faint chill of desolation touched me. It would have been cheering to have news of the Boy and his cavalcade *en route.*

By three o'clock Chambéry was well in sight, lying far below us as we wound down from mountain heights, and looking, from our point of view, in position something like an inferior Aosta. It basked in a great sun-swept plain, and away to the left a lateral valley, dimly blue, opened towards Modane and the Mont Cenis. Descending, we found the resemblance carried on by a few ancient châteaux and fortified farmhouses, and as we had now come upon a part of the road which Joseph knew, he pointed out to me, in the far distance, the little villa, Les Charmettes, where Rousseau and Madame de Warens kept house together. Again and again I thought we were on the point of arriving in the town, and had visions of exchanging adventures with the Boy at the Hôtel de France; but always the place seemed to recede before our eyes, elusive as a mirage, alighting again five or six miles away; and this it did, not once, but several times, with singular skill and accuracy.

At last, however, after a tedious tramp along a monotonously level road, upon which we had plunged suddenly, we came into an old town, all grey, with the soft grey of storks' wings. The place had a mild dignity of its own—as befitted the ancient capital of Savoie—and might have lived, if necessary, on the romantic reputation of its ancient château, standing up high and majestic above a populous modern street. There was an air of almost courtly refinement that reminded me of the wide, sedate avenues of Versailles; and no doubt this effect was largely due to the fine statues and decorative grouping of the arcaded streets. One monument was so imposing and so unique, that I forgot for a moment my anxiety to find the Boy and

hear his news. The huge pile held me captive, staring up at a miniature Nelson column, supported on the backs of four colossal elephants sculptured in grey granite of true elephant-colour. These benevolent mammoths, not content with the duty of bearing a tower of stone with a more than life-sized general balancing on top of it, generously spent their spare time in pouring volumes of water from wrinkled trunks into a huge basin. Joseph knew that the balancing general, De Boigne, had used a vast fortune made in the service of an Indian prince, to shower benefits on his native town, as his elephants showered water, and that it was in gratitude to him that Chambéry had raised the monument; but I was disappointed to learn that the elephants had no prototypes in real life. It would have satisfied my imagination to hear that the soldier of fortune had returned from the Orient to his birthplace, with the four original elephants following him like dogs, having refused to be left behind. But nothing is quite perfect in history, and one usually feels that one could have arranged the incidents more dramatically one's self; indeed, some historians seem to have found the temptation irresistible.

Joseph promised other choice bits of interest in and near mountain-ringed Chambéry; but I had small appetite for sightseeing without the Boy, and after my brief reverence to the elephants, I hurried the muleteer and mule to the hotel.

At the door we were met by a porter, far too polite a person to betray the surprise which my companions Joseph and Finois invariably excited in civilisation. He helped to unfasten the pack, and as it disappeared into the vestibule, I was about to bid Joseph *au revoir*. But his face gave me pause.

Like the key to a cipher, it told me all the secret workings of his mind.

"You might wait here before putting up Finois," I said, "until I enquire inside whether the young Monsieur and Innocentina have arrived safely. No doubt they have, as we did not catch them up on the road, and it would have been difficult to mistake the way. Still——"

"*Voilà,* Monsieur!" exclaimed Joseph, his deep eyes brightening at something to be seen over my shoulder.

I turned, and there was meek, grey Souris leading the way for Innocentina and Fanny, who were trailing slowly towards us down the street.

I was delighted to see them. Not until now had I realised how beautiful was Innocentina, how engaging the two little plush-coated donkeys. I loved all three.

"*Eh bien,* Innocentina!" I gaily cried. "How are you? How is your young Monsieur?"

"He was well when I saw him last," returned Innocentina. "He must be very far away by this time."

"Very far away?" I echoed her words blankly.

"Yes, Monsieur. Here is a letter, which he told me to deliver to you without fail. I was not to leave Chambéry until I had put it into your hand, myself. I was on my way to your hotel, to see if you had arrived. Now that I have seen you"—here a starry flash at Joseph—"I can begin my journey."

"Where, if I may ask?"

"Towards my home. Monsieur had better read his letter."

I had taken the sealed envelope mechanically, without looking at it. Now I fixed my eyes upon

'VOILÀ, MONSIEUR!".

the address, which was written in a firm, original, and interesting hand, that impressed me as familiar, though I could not think where I had seen it. Certainly, so far as I could remember, in all my journeyings with him I had never happened to see the Boy's handwriting. Yet Innocentina said this letter was from him.

Suddenly it occurred to me that I could do something more enlightening than stare at the envelope: I could open it. I did so, breaking a seal with the same monogram I had noticed on the gold fittings in the celebrated bag. Apparently the entwined letters were M. R. L.

"Forgive me, dear Man," were the first words I read, and they rang like a knell in my heart. Without going further I knew what was coming. I was to hear that I had lost the Boy.

"Dear Man, the Prince vanishes, not because he wishes it, but because he must. He can't explain. But, though you may not understand now, believe this. He has been happier in these wanderings, since you and he were friends, than he ever was before. You have been more than good to the troublesome 'Brat' who has upset all your arrangements and calculations so often. Perhaps you may never see the Boy any more. Yet, who knows what may happen at Monte Carlo? Anyhow, whatever comes in the future, he will never forget, never cease to care for you; and of one thing besides he is sure. Never again will he like any other man as much as the One Man who deserves to begin with a capital.

"Good-bye, dear Man, and all good things be with you, wherever you may go, is the prayer of—Boy."

Perhaps never to see the Boy again! Why, I must be dreaming this. I should wake up soon, and everything would be as it had been. I had the sensation of having swallowed something very large and very cold, which would not melt. Reading the letter over for the second time made it no better, but rather worse. The Boy had become almost as important in my scheme of life as my lungs or my legs, and I did not quite see, at the moment, how it would be any more possible to get on without one than the other.

Behold, I was stricken down by mine own familiar friend; yet no wrath against him burned within me; there was only that cold lump of disappointment, which seemed to be increasing to the size of a small iceberg. Even lacking explanations, or attempt at them, I knew that he had told the truth without flattery. He had wanted to stay, yet he had gone. And he said that perhaps I might never see him again! If I could have had my choice last night, whether to have the Boy lopped off my life, or to lose a hand, the probabilities are that I would have sacrificed the hand. But I had been offered no choice.

I recalled our parting, and found new meaning in the words he had spoken at his door. There was no doubt about it; even then he had decided to break away from me.

I realised this, and at the same instant rebelled against the decision. I determined not to accept it. He had vanished because of the two Americans; exactly why, I could not even guess, but I was certain that the reason was not to his discredit. To theirs, perhaps, but not to his. Nevertheless, they were somehow to blame for my loss, and if the

young men had appeared at this moment, I should have been impelled to do them a mischief.

The principal thing was, however, not to let them cheat me irrevocably of my comrade. I would not depend solely upon that hint about Monte Carlo. I would find out where he had gone, and I would follow. Let him be angry if he would. His anger, though a hot flame while it burned, never endured long.

"Did Monsieur leave here by rail?" I enquired of Innocentina.

She shrugged her shoulders. "That I cannot tell."

"Do you mean you can't, or won't?"

"I know nothing, Monsieur, except that I have been paid well, and told that I may go home as soon as I like, and by what route I like, having delivered the letter to Monsieur. My young master gave me enough to return with the donkeys to Mentone all the way from Chambéry by rail if I chose; but I prefer to walk down, and keep the extra money for my *dot*. It will make me a good one."

I am not sure that, before disentangling a huge bottle-fly from Fanny's long lashes, she did not glance under her own at Joseph, when giving this information.

"Look here, Innocentina," I said beguilingly, "tell me which way, and how, your young Monsieur has gone, and I will double that *dot* of yours."

"Not if you would quadruple it, Monsieur. I promised my master to say nothing."

"Couldn't you get absolution for breaking a promise?"

"No, Monsieur. I am not that kind of Catholic.

It is only heretics who break their promises, and take money for it—like Judas Iscariot."

Joseph did not charge at this red rag, but looked so utterly depressed that Innocentina's eyes relented.

"Very well," I said. "You deserve praise for your loyalty. I ought not to have tried to corrupt it. But, you know, I shall find out in the town, or at the railway station."

Innocentina smiled. "I do not think so, Monsieur."

"We shall see," I retorted. "Joseph, where is the railway station?"

Joseph pointed, accompanying his gesture with directions. Then he offered to be my guide, but I refused his services and left him with Innocentina, having bidden him call at my room in the hotel for instructions later.

But the prophecy of Innocentina the Seeress was fulfilled. I could learn nothing of the Boy or his movements, at the *gare* of Chambéry. Several trains had gone out, bound for several destinations in different directions, during the past three hours, and no one answering the description I gave of the Boy had been seen to leave.

Sadder, but no wiser, I returned to the Hôtel de France, and asked if a youth of seventeen, "with large blue eyes, chestnut hair which curled, a complexion tanned brown, a panama hat, and a suit of navy-blue serge knickerbockers," had lunched there.

The answer was no. Such a young gentleman had not come to the hotel, nor had he been noticed in the town, either with or without a young woman and a couple of donkeys.

I had no more than finished my questionings and gone up to my room, when Joseph arrived—a wistful, expectant Joseph, with a deep light of excitement burning in his eyes.

"Any news?" I asked.

"No, Monsieur, except that in an hour Innocentina starts to walk on to Les Echelles with her *ânes*."

"She is energetic."

"The girl knows not what is the fatigue. Besides, each day less on the road means so many more francs added to the *dot*."

"Innocentina seems very keen upon increasing that *dot*. Has she anyone in view to share it with her?"

"She has not confided that to me, Monsieur."

"I suppose he would have to be a good Catholic?"

"Of that I am not so sure. I do not think she would object to a good Protestant, if he would allow the children to be brought up in her faith."

"The lady is brave. She takes time by the forelock."

"It is the wise way, Monsieur."

"Well, whoever he may be, I am sure *you* do not envy the future *mari, dot* or no *dot*. Your opinion of Innocentina——"

"Ah, it is changed, Monsieur, completely changed, I confess."

"Then, after all, it is Innocentina who has converted you."

Joseph bent his head to hide a flush. "Perhaps, Monsieur, if you put it in that way. Yet it was not of myself nor of Innocentina I came to talk, but of the plans of Monsieur."

"Plans? I've no plans," I answered dejectedly.

"Will Monsieur wish to proceed to-morrow morning as usual?"

"Proceed where?" I gloomily capped his question with another.

"On the way south, towards the Riviera, is it not? If we made an early start, it might be possible to go by the route of la Grande Chartreuse, and reach the monastery late in the afternoon. If Monsieur wished to sleep there, travellers are accommodated at the Sister House, which has been turned into an hôtellerie since the expulsion of the Order."

I reflected a moment before replying. On the face of it, it appeared like weakness to change my plans simply because I had been deserted by a comrade whose very existence had been unknown to me when first I made them. Yet, on the other hand, I had grown so used to his companionship now, that the thought of continuing my journey without him was distasteful. With the Little Pal, no day had ever seemed too long, no misadventure but had had its spice. Lacking the Little Pal, the vista of day after day spent in covering the country at the rate of three miles an hour loomed before me monotonous as the treadmill. My gorge rose against it. I could not go on as I had begun. Why punish myself by a diet of salt when the savour had gone?

"Joseph," I said at last, "the disappearance of the young Monsieur has been a blow to me, I admit. It has destroyed my appetite for sightseeing, for the moment, at all events. I can't rearrange my plans instantly; but this I have determined. I'll end my walking-tour here. What to do afterwards I will make up my mind in good time, but meanwhile,

I won't keep you dancing attendance upon me. You will be anxious to get back home——"

"Monsieur, I have no home." There was despair in Joseph's tone, and suddenly the keen point of truth pierced the armour of my selfishness. Poor Joseph, facing exile—from Innocentina—and keeping his countenance politely, while I densely discoursed of "blows"! Being a muleteer "farmed out" by a master, he was at the mercy of Fate, and temporarily I represented Fate. He could not journey on southwards, whither his heart was wandering, unless I bade him go. This fine fellow, this old soldier, was as much at my orders as if I had been a king.

"If you aren't in a hurry to get back to Martigny, Joseph," said I, changing my tone, "I'll tell you what you can do for me. You may take some of my luggage down to the Riviera. I'm expecting a portmanteau to arrive here by rail to-night or to-morrow morning, with plenty of clothing in it. But there are those hold-alls which Finois has carried for so long. I can't travel about with them in railway carriages; at that I draw the line; yet if I sent them by *grande vitesse,* their contents would be injured or stolen. Take them down to Monte Carlo for me. I shall go there sooner or later, to meet some friends of mine who are motoring, and I shall stop at the Royal."

Joseph's face would have put radium to shame, with the light it generated.

"Monsieur is not joking? He is in earnest?" the poor fellow stammered.

"Most certainly. And when we meet on the Riviera, we will talk over a scheme for your future of which I've been thinking. If you would like

to buy Finois of your patron, and two or three other animals only less admirable than he, setting up in business for yourself, I think I know a man who might advance you the money."

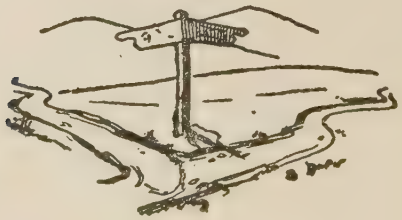
"Oh, Monsieur!"

Had there been a little more of the French, or a little less of the Swiss, in honest Joseph's blood, I think that he would have fallen on his knees and rained kisses on my mud-stained boots. The Swiss tipped the balance, luckily for us both, and kept him erect; but there was a suspicious glitter in his deep eyes, and a sudden pinkness of his respectable brown nose, which gave to his "Oh, Monsieur!" more meaning than a volume of protestations.

His hand came out impulsively, then flew back humbly to his side, but I put out mine and grasped it.

"Monsieur, I would die for you," he said.

"I would prefer," I returned, "that you should live—for Innocentina."



CHAPTER XXVII

The Strange Mushroom

"Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face?"

—SHAKESPEARE.

WHEN Joseph had gone, with his pockets and his heart both full to bursting, I felt much like the captain of a small fishing vessel, wrecked in strange seas, who has seen his comrades depart on rafts, while he stayed on board his sinking ship alone with three biscuits and a gill of water. There was also a certain resemblance between me and a well-meaning plant which has been pulled up by its roots just as it had begun to grow nicely, and then stuck into the earth again, upside down, to do the best it can.

I was not quite sure yet which was up or down, and which way I had better grow, if at all. There was, however, an attraction in a southerly direction: letters were to be forwarded to me at Grenoble, and there would probably be one from Jack or Molly Winston, saying when and where they might be expected to come upon the scene with Mercédès. Finding me stranded, they would doubtless take pity upon my forlornness, and offer me a lift in their car, down to the Riviera. And to the Riviera I still felt strongly impelled to go, though I had no longer the Contessa for an excuse. She had been engaged, in my little drama, for the part of "leading juvenile," with the privilege of understudying the

heroine. But she had not shown an aptitude for either rôle, and having stepped down to that of first walking lady, she had minced off my stage altogether. Now the cast was filled up without her, though strangely filled, since after the first act there had been no leading lady at all. Nevertheless, having arranged a scene at Monte Carlo I could not persuade myself to give it up, though it would not be played, in any event, at the Contessa's villa.

The Boy had vanished, and the sole word he had left was that I had better not count upon seeing him again. But the more I thought of it, the less necessity I saw for taking him at that word. He perhaps flattered himself that he had picked up all clues and carried them off with him in the wonderful bag. But he had purposefully hinted that "something might happen at Monte Carlo," and I hoped the something might mean that, after all, the Boy would materialise with his sister at the Hôtel de Paris on the night after our arrival. In any case, if the Princess were going to Monte Carlo, there would the Fairy Prince be also, and I did not see why I should not be there too, whether Molly and Jack tooled me down in their motor or not.

Fifteen minutes after Joseph had gone from my life to mingle his lot with Innocentina's, I had my own plans definitely mapped out. I would stop in Chambéry overnight, to wait for the portmanteau with which I had kept up a speaking acquaintance in the larger centres of civilisation, during the tour, and next day I would go on to Grenoble by train, there to pick up letters.

The luggage duly arrived in the evening, so that there was no bar to the carrying out of my design; and, accordingly, after my coffee on the following

morning, I conscientiously went out to see more of the town before taking the eleven-o'clock train.

It was only ten, and as my arrangements were all made, I had time for strolling—too much to suit my mood. The murmur of an automobile preparing to take flight attracted me from a distance, for it seemed that the voice had the cadence of a car I knew. I hastened my steps, turned a corner, and there, in front of the Hôtel de France's rival, stood a fine motor, panting, quivering in eagerness to dart away.

It was a Mercédès, and if it were not Molly Winston's wedding-present Mercédès, it was that Mercédès' twin. But there was a strange mushroom in it.

I would have known Molly's mushroom among a thousand. It was small, round, compact, and of a dark cream colour. This mushroom was flatter, wider, more expansive, with an exceedingly slender stem; and in tint it was of a pale silvery grey. It grew up straight and slim in the tonneau of the car, all alone, unaccompanied by any similar growths, or any guardian goblins; and several servants of the hotel were grouped about, waiting to see it off.

I waited, too, sniffing adventure with the scent of petrol, and interested in the resemblance to that good Dragon with which I had been friends; but I was about to turn away at last when a form which had evidently been squatting behind the car on the other side, rose to its feet. It was that of Gotteland, and had he been a long-lost uncle from Australia with his pockets crammed with wills in my favour, I could not have been more delighted to see him.

As I rushed forward to claim him as my own, Molly and Jack came out of the hotel.

"Monty!" Jack cried, with a sincerity of joy which warmed my heart. As for his wife, she cried not at all, but merely gasped.

"What luck for me!" I exclaimed, shaking both Molly's hands so hard that it was fortunate (as she remarked afterwards) that she had on "only her rainy-day rings." "I did hope to hear of you at Grenoble, but scarcely dared think of actually meeting you, even there. In two minutes more I should have been on the way to catch my train."

"Here's your train, old man," said Jack, indicating the throbbing automobile.

"My one true love, Mercédès," I remarked, looking fondly at the car.

"Sh!" whispered Molly, with an odd little sound which was like a giggle strangled at birth. "She's there."

"Who?" I started, bewildered.

"Mercédès."

"I know; the darling! I long to have my hands on her again."

"Oh, Lord Lane, *do* be careful! You don't understand. I mean the real Mercédès. The girl who gave me the car. She's sitting there. She'll hear you."

"It's all right," said Jack. "The motor's making such a row, she wouldn't catch the words."

"She joined us h—lately," explained Molly hurriedly.

"I remember now. You used to talk rather a lot about her and want us to meet."

"Well, you have your wish now, dearie," Jack chimed in. "You can introduce them with your own fair hand."

"Wait—wait," Molly whispered piteously, as

Jack would have taken a step forward, and pulled me with him, a peculiarly dare-devil look in his handsome eyes. "For *goodness'* sake, Jack!"

Her voice restrained him, and again we were in conclave. "You see, Lord Lane, it's rather awkward. We want you to go on with us, immensely, but——"

"You're awfully good," I hastily cut in. "But I quite see, and I couldn't think of——"

"Oh, please, that isn't what I meant. Now, will you and Jack both be quite quiet, like angels, and let me talk for a while, till I make everything clear to everybody, about everybody else. Don't grin. I know I'm not beginning well, but the beginning's the difficult part. We wrote to you, Lord Lane, to Grenoble, saying we would be arriving about as soon as you got the letter. We didn't know whether we could tear you away from your mule or not; but anyhow, we should have seen each other and got each other's news. Then this friend of mine joined us unexpectedly; at least, we thought we might meet her, but we weren't at all sure she would want to travel with us. However, here she is, and she's a perfect dear; and next to Jack and Dad I love her better than anybody else in the world. Besides, she gave me the car; and you know I told you how ill she had been, and how she was travelling for her health. Altogether we have to consider her before anyone; and I want to know, Lord Lane, if you'll think me a regular little beast if I speak to her first, before we arrange anything?"

I opened my lips to answer with a complimentary protest, but before I could frame a word, she had rushed to the two Mercédès, her mushroom hanging limp in her hand, and had entered

into a low-voiced conversation with the human namesake.

"Look here, Jack; I wouldn't put you out for the world," I said. "As for tearing myself from the mule, that surgical operation has already been performed, and I was going on to Monte Carlo——"

"That's our goal," cut in Jack. "Molly maligned the place of old days. Now I want her to do it justice. You and I will show her Monte at its best."

"Yes, but I'll go down by rail, and meet you there."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Molly's friend is one of the most charming girls alive, but she has passed through a great trouble, followed by a severe illness. She came to us in some distress of mind, and we are bound, as Molly says, to consider her, as she may not think herself equal to intercourse with strangers. However, all that's necessary is to explain you to her, as I am now explaining her to you, and the thing settles itself. There can be no question of your not going on with us. You and Mercédès won't interfere with each other in the least, because, you see, now that you've turned up, the thing is to get down quietly, and—and enjoy ourselves at the journey's end. We'll make a rush of it. In any case, Molly would have sat in the tonneau with her friend, and the only difference you will make in our arrangements is that I shall have you as a companion in front instead of Gotteland."

At this moment our fair emissary returned from the enemy's camp.

"Mercédès says that not for anything would she cheat us out of your company," announced Molly. "Only she hopes you won't think her rude and horrid if she doesn't talk. There's her message; but I

really think, Lord Lane, that the best thing is to take no notice of the poor child. She is very nervous and upset still, but I hope in a few days she will be herself again. I won't even introduce you to her. She and I will sit in the tonneau, as quiet as two kittens, while you and Jack in front can talk over all your adventures since you met, and forget our existence. We shan't be so very long on the way, shall we, Jack?"

I began another "but," which was scornfully disregarded by both Jack and Molly. I might as well consent now, as later, they said, since they would simply refuse to leave Chambéry without me, and the longer I took to see reason, the more *essence* would the motor be wasting.

Thus adjured, I allowed myself to be hustled off to my hotel by Jack, who insisted on accompanying me lest I should turn traitor on the way. In ten minutes Gotteland would drive the car to the door of the France, and I was expected to be ready by that time. My packing had been done before I went out, by the united efforts of a *valet de chambre* and myself; but now all had to be undone again; my motoring coat (unused for weeks and aged in appearance by as many years) dragged up from the lowest stratum with my goblin-goggles, and a few small things dashed into a weird travelling bag which a confused porter rushed out to buy at a neighbouring shop. While I settled the hotel bill, Jack arranged to have my portmanteau expressed to Grenoble, and by a scramble our tasks were finished when the voice of the car called us to the door.

The whole incident had happened so quickly, that I had no time to realise the change in my circumstances, when, "sole, like a falling star," the motor

"shot through the pillared town" with me on board.

There had been a time when I shrank from the name of the car's giver, believing that Molly thrust it too obviously into notice. When "that dear girl Mercédès" had threatened to enter our conversations I had often kept her out by force; but now it seemed that I, not she, was the intruder, and in a far more material way. This was, perhaps, poetical justice, but I did not grudge it, since it was evident that Molly no longer cherished the intention of dangling her friend the heiress before me like a brilliant fly over the nose of an impecunious trout. On the contrary, she warned me off the premises. We were to hurry down to Monte Carlo as quickly as possible, that the situation might not be overstrained. Mercédès in the tonneau, I in the front seat, were to live and let live during the rapid journey, and this was well.

I dimly remembered that, in the first days of our journey in search of a mule, Molly had vaunted her friend's beauty, but the silver-grey mushroom prevented me from verifying or disproving this statement. The small, triangular talc window was greyly-opaque, or else there was a grey veil underneath; my one glance had not told me which, and I neither dared nor desired to steal another.

Jack supplied the blanks in our somewhat broken correspondence, by skimming over the details of their doings; how they had spent most of their time since our parting in Switzerland; how they had arrived at Aix-les-Bains the very morning we left for Mont Revard; and how they had motored to Chambéry yesterday afternoon.

"Think of my being in the same town with you

for more than twelve hours, and not knowing it!" I exclaimed. "To borrow an expression of Mrs. Winston's, I was jolly 'low in my mind' last night, and the very thought that you two were close by would have been cheering."

I had not dared address myself to Molly in the other camp, but evidently all communication between the lines was not to be broken off. The wind must have carried my words to her ear, for she bent forward, leaning her arm on the back of our seat.

"Did you say you were miserable last night?" she inquired with flattering eagerness.

"Yes. Awfully miserable."

"Poor Lord Lane! I haven't understood yet exactly why you suddenly gave up your walking tour, and got the idea of going on by rail. I thought from your letters you were having such a good time, that we could hardly bribe you to desert—your party and come with us, even at Grenoble."

"My party deserted me, and that was the end of my 'good time,'" I replied, charmed with Molly's conception of the rôle of a "quiet kitten" whose existence was to be forgotten. As if any man could ever forget hers!

"What, your nice Joseph and his Finois?" she inquired.

"When I speak of 'my party' I refer particularly to the boy I wrote you about," I returned, far from averse to being drawn out on the subject of my troubles, though I had resolved, were I not intimately questioned, to let them prey upon my damask cheek.

"Oh, yes, that wonderful American boy. Did he keep right on being wonderful all the time, or did he turn out disappointing in the end?"

"Disappointing!" I echoed. "No; rather the

other way round. He was always surprising me with new qualities. I never saw anyone like him."

"Ah, perhaps that's because you never knew other American boys. I dare say if I'd met him I shouldn't have found him so remarkable."

"Yes, you would," I protested. "There could be no two opinions about it."

"Is he good-looking?"

"Extraordinarily. Such eyes as his are wasted on a boy—or would be on any other boy. If he'd been a girl, he would have been one for a man to fall head over ears in love with."

"You're enthusiastic! Hasn't he got any sisters?"

"He has one, who is supposed to be like him. I was promised—or partly promised—to meet her in Monte Carlo, at the end of our journey, where the Boy expected her to join him."

"Oh, has he been called away by her?"

"I don't think so."

"I fancied that might have been why he left you."

"I don't know what his reason was, but I have faith enough in the little chap to be sure it was a *good one.*"

"Sure you didn't bore each other?"

"If you had ever seen that boy, you'd know that the word 'bore' would perish in his presence like a microbe in hot water. As for me—I don't believe I bored him. He did say once that we would part when we came to the 'turnstile,' meaning the point of mutual boredom, but I can't believe the turnstile was in his sight. I think that his resolution to go was sudden and unexpected."

"He must have been an interesting boy, and you ought to be grateful to Fate for sending him your

way, because apparently he gave you no time for brooding on the past."

"The past? Oh, by Jove, I couldn't think what you meant for a second. You have a right to say 'I told you so,' Mrs. Winston. There was nothing in all that, you know, except a little wounded vanity; and you know, *you* are really the Fate I have to thank for finding it out so soon."

"What *do* you mean?" exclaimed Molly, almost as if she were frightened. "I did nothing at all. I——"

"You took me away with you and Jack. The rest followed."

"Oh, *that*. I didn't understand. Well, as we shall get you down to Monte Carlo soon, you will meet your boy again."

"I wish I could be sure."

"I thought you said it was an engagement."

"Only conditional. Besides, had we walked, we should have been weeks on the way. I wonder you don't laugh in my face, Mrs. Winston, but you'd understand if you could have met the Boy."

"I supposed Jack was your best friend," complained Molly.

"So he is. But this is different. I'm going to look for the Boy at Monte Carlo. What I'm hoping is, that after all he may keep the half-engagement he made to meet me there."

"When?"

"On the night after my arrival for a dinner at the Hôtel de Paris, to be given in honour of him and his sister."

"You think he will?"

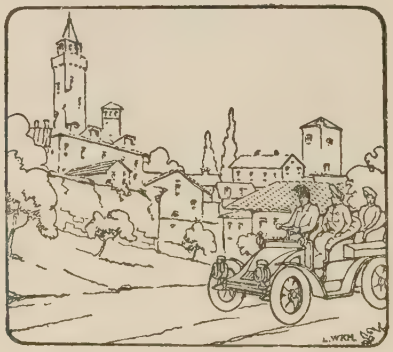
"It's worth going on the chance."

"You are the right kind of friend," said Molly,

"and you deserve to be rewarded, doesn't he, Jack?"

"Yes," Jack flung over his shoulder as he drove; "and I shall swear a vendetta against everybody concerned, if he isn't."

This did not strike me as a particularly brilliant remark, but Molly seemed to find it witty, for she laughed merrily, with a certain impish ring in her glee, reminiscent of the Little Pal in some moods. Evidently she had exhausted her long list of questions, for, laughing still, she twisted her slim body half round in the tonneau, turning a shoulder upon us. I took this as a signal that Mercédès was now to have her share of attention, and tactfully bestowed mine on Jack.



CHAPTER XXVIII

The World without the Boy

"A . . . somewhat headlong carriage."
—R. L. Stevenson.

Though I had given Molly eyes and ears during her long catechism, I had been vaguely aware, nevertheless, that on leaving the Hôtel de France we had crossed a bridge over the almost dry and pebbly bed of the insignificant Leysse; that we had passed the stately elephants, and a robust marble lady typifying France in the act of receiving on her breast a slender Savoie; that we had caught a last glimpse of the château, and were spinning along a well-kept road, cheek by jowl with the railway to Lyons.

From a high mountain on our left, the silver Cascade de Coux fell vertically, like a white horse's tail; and I smiled to see, as we flashed by, a little house which honoured a valiant foe against whom I had fought, with the name of the Café de Boers.

Up and up mounted our road, cresting green billows of rolling mountain land. We were running towards the boundary of Savoie, into Dauphiné, a country which I had never seen. The Boy and I had talked of entering it together and visiting its Seven Marvels, the very possession of which made it seem in our eyes alluringly mediæval. Had he been my companion still, we would have been travelling some hidden side-path, where doubtless Joseph and

Innocentina, chaperoned by *les animaux,* were happily straying at this moment. I could almost hear the donkey-girl's mechanically constant, warning cry, "Fanny-anny, Fanny-anny! Souris-ouris!" like a low undertone of accompaniment to the thrum of the motor.

The fancied sound smote me with homesickness, and to coax my mind from the disappointment which still rankled, I asked Jack when he would let me try my hand at driving.

"Not here," said he with a smile, which was instantly explained by an abrupt plunge from the top of a long hill down into a cutting between lichen-scaled rocks, tracing with our "pneus" as we went a series of giddy zig-zags. We had hardly twisted one way when lo! the time had come to twist in the opposite direction, and nowhere had we a radius of more than twenty yards in which to perform our tricks.

"I couldn't have done that as well as you did it, I confess," said I, with becoming modesty.

"It's easy enough when you've got the knack," replied the "Lightning Conductor."

"So, no doubt, is reeling, writhing, and fainting in coils. Motoring down these serpentine hills is like hurling yourself into space, and trusting to Providence."

"So is all of life," said Jack. "A timid man might say the same of getting out of bed in the morning."

"Even I can do the trick," cut in Molly, who was taking a temporary interest in our affairs again. "At least, I can this year, now that chickens are better than they used to be."

"They *are* looking nice and fat this summer" I judicially remarked.

"I don't mean that," explained Molly. "But they are more sensible. Last year, before Jack and I were married, chickens were so bad that I used to dream of nothing else in my sleep. I had chicken nightmares. The absurd creatures never would realise when they were well off, but even in the midst of laying a most important egg on one side of the road, our automobile had only to come whizzing along to convince them that salvation depended on getting across to the other. This year they seem to have formed a sort of Chicken Club, a league of defence against motors, and to have started a propaganda."

My imagination tricked me, or this theory of Molly's evoked a faint sound of stifled mirth in the heart of the mysterious mushroom. In haste I turned away, lest I should be suspected of regarding it, and Jack began to pump my memory mercilessly for what it might retain of his driving lessons. Luckily, I had forgotten nothing, and I was able to demonstrate my knowledge by pointing to the various parts of the machine with each glib reference I made.

By-and-bye, we came to a place where a grotto was "much recommended"; but swallows, southward bound, do not stop in their flight for grottos. We darted by, thundered through the humming darkness of Napoleon's tunnel, and flashed out into a startling landscape, as sensational as the country of the "Delectable Mountains" in "Pilgrim's Progress." The cup-like valley was ringed in by mountains of astonishing shapes; it was nature posing for a picture by John Martin. In the fields were dotted characteristic Dauphiné houses, little elfin things with overhanging roofs like caps tied under their chins.

Soon, we raced into the main street of tiny Les Echelles, whence, in the good old days, fair Princess Beatrice of Savoie went away to wed with the famed Raymond of Provence. We whisked through the village, and down the valley to St. Laurens du Pont, and the entrance to that great rift between mountains which leads to the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse.

As we plunged into the narrow jaws of the superb ravine, a wave of regret for the Boy swept over me. He and I had talked of this day—the day we should see the deserted monastery hidden among its mountains; now it had come, and we were parted.

The society of Jack and Molly and the motor car could make up for many things, but it could not stifle longings for the Little Pal. Besides, magnificent as was Mercédès (the Dragon, not the Mushroom) I felt that Finois and Fanny-anny would have been more in keeping with the place. I was too dispirited to care whether or no my eyes were filled with dust; therefore I had not goggled myself, and I think that Jack must have gathered something of my thoughts from my long face.

"How would you like to get out and walk here, like pilgrims of old?" he asked. "It will be too much for the girls, but Gotteland will drive them up slowly, not to be too far in advance. American girls, you'll find, if you ever make a study of one or more of them, can do everything in the world except—walk. There they have to bow to English girls."

"That's because we've got smaller feet," retorted Molly. "Where an English girl can walk ten miles we can do only five, but it's quite enough. And we have such imaginations that we can sit in this auto-

mobile and fancy ourselves princesses on ambling palfreys."

It was close to the deserted distillery of the famous liqueur that we parted company, the car, piled with our discarded great-coats, forging ahead up the historic path. The little tramway that used to carry the cases of liqueur to the station at Fourvoirie was nearly obliterated by new-grown grass; the vast buildings stood empty. Never again would the mellow Chartreuse verte and Chartreuse jaune be fragrantly distilled behind the high grey walls, for the makers were banished and scattered far abroad.

We lingered for a moment at the narrow entrance to Le Désert, where the rushing river Guiers foams through the throttled gorge, giving barely room for the road scored along the face of the cliff. It was like a doorway to the lost domain of the monks, and Jack and I agreed that St. Bruno was a man of genius to find such a retreat. A retreat it was literally. St. Bernard had taken his followers to a place where, suffering great hardships, they could best devote their lives to succouring others; but St. Bruno's theory had evidently been that holy men can do more good to their kind by prayer in peaceful sanctuaries than by offering more material aid.

Here,—at the doorway of St. Bruno's long corridor,—the ravine, the old forge, the single-arched bridge flung high across the deep bed of the roaring torrent, had all grouped themselves as if after a consultation upon artistic effect. Once, there had been an actual gate, built alike for defence and for limitation, but there were no traces of it left for the eye of the amateur.

We passed into the defile, and the motor car was

out of sight long ago. Higher and higher the brown road climbed. The mountains towered close and tall. Great pillared palaces of rock loomed against the sky like castles in the air, incalculably far above the green heads and sloping shoulders of the nearer mountain slopes.

I had thought that green was never so green as in the Valley of Aosta, but here in St. Bruno's corridor there was a new richness of emerald in the green carpet and wall hangings, such as I had not yet known. It was green stamped with living gold, in delicate fleur-de-lis patterns where the sun wove bright threads; and high above was the ceiling of lapis lazuli, in pure unclouded blue.

We heard no sound save the voices of unseen woodcutters crying to each other from mountain slope to mountain slope, the resonant ring of their axes, striking out wild, echoing notes with a fleeting clang of steel on pine, and now and again the sudden thunder-crash of a falling tree, like the roar of a distant avalanche.

By-and-bye we came to the aërial bridge which spans the Guiers Mort, slender and graceful as the arch of a rainbow, and as we gazed down at the far, white water hurling itself in sheets of foam past the detaining rocks, the sharp toot of a horn broke discordantly into the deep-toned music. A motor car sprang round an abrupt curve and flashed by, but not so quickly that I did not recognise among the six occupants the two young Americans of Mont Revard. They passed me as unseeingly as they did the scenery: for they were talking as fast to two pretty girls opposite them in the tonneau, as if the girls had not been talking equally fast to them at the same time. I bore the pair a grudge, and the sight

of them brought back the consciousness of my injury.

St. Bruno, fortunate in many ways, was a lucky saint to have so beautiful a bridge named after him. And as we climbed the brown road—moist with tears wept by the mountains for the banished monks—it seemed to us that the scenery was always leading up to him, as a preface leads up to the first chapter of a book. We went through tunnels as a thread goes through the eye of a needle; we wound round intricate turns of the road; we came upon pinnacle rocks; and then, at last, when we least expected the climax of our journey, we dropped into a great green basin, rimmed with soaring crags. In the midst stood an enormous building, a vast conglomeration of pointed, dove-grey roofs and dun-coloured walls, a city of slate and stone spread over acres of ground and seeming a part of the impressive yet strangely peaceful wilderness.

Looking at the vast structure, I was ready to believe that St. Bruno had waved his staff in the shadow of a rough-hewn mountain, saying: "Let there be a monastery," and suddenly, there was a monastery; but our motor, quivering with nervous energy before a door in the high wall, snatched me back to practicalities.

Molly, leaning quietly back in the tonneau beside the Perpetual Mushroom, saw us coming from afar off, and waved a hand of absurd American smallness. By the time we were within speaking distance, she was out of the car and coming toward us.

"We were so hungry, that we lunched while we waited," she explained, "so now you and Jack can go to the hôtellerie and have something quickly. We'll walk in the woods until you come back, and then, as

Mercédès doesn't seem to mind, we'll all go into the monastery together."

It was not until the door of the Grande Chartreuse had opened to receive us, and closed again behind our backs, shutting us into a large empty quadrangle, that the Spirit of the place took us by the hand.

Over the steep grey roofs (pointed like monkish hands with finger-tips joined in prayer) we gazed up at mountain peaks, grey and green, and pointing also to a heaven which seemed strangely near.

The spell of the vast, the stupendous silence fell upon us. Somehow, Molly drifted from me to Jack as we walked noiselessly on, led by a silent guide, as if she craved the warm comfort of a loved presence, and for a few brief moments the veiled Mercédès paced step for step beside me. But we did not speak to each other.

What a tragic, tremendous silence it was! Yes, I wanted the Boy. I should have been glad of the touch of his little shoulder. Thinking of him thus, by some accident the sleeve of Mercédès's coat brushed against mine. Still, not a word from either of us. I did not even say, "I beg your pardon," for that would have been to obtrude my voice upon the thousand voices of the Silence; dead voices, living voices; voices of passionate protest, voices of heart-breaking homesickness, of aching grief and longing, never to be assuaged. Poor monks—poor banished men who had loved their home, and belonged to it, as the clasping tendrils of old, old ivy belong to the oak.

How dared we come here into this place from which they had been driven, we aliens? I had not known it would grip me so by the throat. How full

the emptiness was!—as full to my mind as the air is of motes when a bar of sunshine reveals them.

It was the Palace of Sleep, lost in the mountain forests, but here there was no hope coming with the springing footsteps of a blithe young prince. The sleepers in this palace could not be waked by a wish, or a magic kiss, for they were ghosts, ghosts everywhere—in the great kitchen, with all its huge polished utensils ready for the meal which would never be cooked, and its neat plain dishes on shelved trays, waiting to be carried to the *grilles* of the *solitaires;* in the Brothers' refectory where the egg-cups were ranged on long, narrow tables, for the meal never to be eaten, where the chair of the Reader was waiting to receive him; in the Fathers' refectory next door; in the dusky corridors, their ends lost in shadow, where only the sad echoes and the running water of the unseen spring were awake; in the chapels; in the cemetery with its old carved stones and humbler wooden crosses; and most of all in the wonderful cells (which were not cells, but mansions), and in their high-walled gardens, the most private of all imaginable spots on earth.

Wandering on and on, alone now, I felt myself the saddest man in a twilight world. Why, I could not have put into words. Had the brotherhood still peopled the monastery, I should have yearned to join them, partly because I was sad, and partly because the so-called cells were the most charming dwelling-places I had seen. Each comprised a two-storied house in miniature, and each had its garden, shut irrevocably away from sight or sound of any other. Into one of these solitary abodes I went alone, and closed the door upon myself and the ghosts. In fancy I was one of the order,

in retreat for a week, my only means of communication with the outer world of the monastery (save for midnight prayers in the dim chapel) a little *grille*. There was my workshop, where I carved wood; there the narrow staircase leading steeply up to my wainscoted bedroom, my study, and my oratory, with windows looking down into the leafy square of garden, planted by my own hands. Standing at one of those windows, I knew the anguish of parting and loss which had torn the heart of the last occupant, before he walked out of the monastery between double lines of Chasseurs Alpins.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Fairy Prince's Ring

"Rub the ring, and the Genius will appear."
—*Arabian Nights.*

Down, down a winding and beautiful road we plunged, on leaving the Grande Chartreuse, while the afternoon sunlight was still golden. The monastery sank out of our sight as we went, as the moon sinks into the sea, and was gone for us as if it were on the other side of the world. Ah, but a sweet, warm world, and I was glad after all that I was not a monk in carved oak cells and walled gardens, but a free young man who could vibrate between the South Pole and the Albany.

Molly said that the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse was like a body without a soul; and in another breath she was asking Jack, quite seriously, whether she could buy one of the cells from the French Government, all complete, to "express" as a present to her father in New York.

We flew, our motor humming like a bee, through exquisite forests clothing the sides of a narrow ravine, where hidden streams made music. Then in a twinkling we slipped out from the secret recesses of scented woods, into a village almost too beautiful to accept as reality, in a practical mood. There it lay, like a little heap of pearls tossed down from the lap of one mountain at the feet of another —and we were at St. Pierre de Chartreuse.

The tiny gem of beauty had caught the glory of Switzerland, and the soft, fairy charm of Dauphiné. Its guardian mountain was a miniature Matterhorn of indescribable grace and airy stateliness; its lesser attendants formed a group of peaks, grey and green and rose. As if enough gifts had not yet been bestowed upon the little place at its christening, a playground of forest land, rolling up over grassy slopes, had been given, with a neighbouring river, swift and clear, to sing it a lullaby.

I had the impulse to clap my hands at St. Pierre de Chartreuse, as at some "setting" excellently designed and carried out by the most celebrated of scene painters. It was a place in which to stop a month, finding a new walk for each new day; but one does not discover walks in a motor car. One sweeps over the country, sounding notes of triumph. We glanced at St. Pierre de Chartreuse and sped on towards Grenoble, through a landscape markedly different from that of Savoie.

In Savoie everything is done lavishly, on a large scale. The eye roams over spaces of noble amplitude, expressing strength in repose.

Dauphiné is livelier and daintier; more lovable, too. Fairies or brownies (since no mortals do it) keep the whole country like a vast private park. In crossing from Savoie into Dauphiné one seemed to hear the allegro movement after listening to the andante.

With each twist of our road the prospect changed. The mountains grew, soared more abruptly, and the youthful-looking landscape smiled at their strange shapes. As for the Cham Chaude, which had been the Matterhorn at St. Pierre de Chartreuse, it now disguised itself for some new part at every turn.

Such lightning changes must have been fatiguing, even for so extraordinarily versatile and clever a mountain, for within fifteen minutes after playing it was the Matterhorn, it was a giant, tonsured monk; a Greek soldier in a helmet; a Dutch cheese; a hen, and a camel.

When Dragon Mercédès had rushed us up the great Col, and whirled round a corner, suddenly a battalion of magnificent white warrior-mountains sprang at us from an ambush of invisibility. Then, no sooner had they struck awe to our hearts with their warlike majesty, than, repentant, they turned into lovely white ladies, bidding us welcome to the rich, ripe figs and purple grapes which they held in their generous laps. I thought of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary with her fair face, her candid sky-blue eyes, her high, noble bearing, and her white dress caught up, heaped with the roses into which her loaves had been transformed. The tallest, purest white mountain of all I chose for sweet Elizabeth, and that was none other than far Mont Blanc, floating magically in pure blue ether, like a gleaming pearl.

Flying down the perfect road towards the plain where two rivers met, loved, and wedded, the valley which was the white mountain's lap blended vague, soft greens and blues and purples, hinting of grapes and figs clustering under leaves. Here and there a vine had been nipped by early frosts and flung its crimson wreaths, like diadems of rubies, in a red arch across distant billows of mountain snows.

Autumn was in the air, and though the grass and most of the trees kept all their richness of summer greenery, a faint, pungent fragrance of dying leaves and the smoke of bonfires came to one's nostrils with

the breeze. Mingled with the exciting scent of petrol, it was delicious.

At the confluence of the newly married Drac and Isère rose the domes and towers of stately old Grenoble, hoary with history; and never a town had a nobler setting. Swooping down in half-circles, as if our car had been a great bird of prey, we saw the valley veiled with a silver haze, which wrapped the city in mystery, while through this gleaming gauze the two rivers threaded like strings of turquoise beads.

"How the Boy would have loved this!" I found myself exclaiming over my shoulder to Molly. "He used often to talk of the great charm of descending from heights upon places, especially new-old places, which one has never seen before."

"Used he?" echoed Molly. "Why, that is rather odd. It is exactly what Mercédès has just been saying."

The Perpetual Mushroom moved impatiently. I fancied by the movement of her shoulder that she resented having her thoughts passed on to me. I hastened to turn away, sorry that I had reminded her inadvertently of my cumbersome existence; but I could not help wondering what she had been thinking of in the monastery when we had walked for full five moments side by side.

There was no disappointment when we had plunged into the silver haze, torn it apart, and entered the town over a dignified bridge. All around us spread the city old and new; above, on the hills, were numerous châteaux, a strange fort, and the queerest of ancient convents, like the cork castles I had seen in shop windows and coveted as a child. In the town there were statues, many statues—

statues everywhere and in honour of everybody. Bayard was there, dying; and there was a delightfully human old fellow (humorous even in marble) who cleverly "lay low" till his worst enemy had finished an elaborately fortified castle, then promptly took it. Not a spacious modern street that had not at least one magnificent old palace, a façade of joyous Renaissance invention, or at least a crumbling mediæval doorway of divine beauty; and nothing of romance was lost because Grenoble makes gloves for all the world.

We sailed out of the town along the straight five-mile road to the Pont de Claix, and now it was ho! for the Basses Alpes, over a road which might have been engineered for an emperor's motoring; past the quaint twin bridges spanning the stream side by side, which our guide-book taught us to recognise as one of the Seven Wonders (with capitals) of Dauphiné. Then came a valley, almost theatrical in its romantic grace. One would not have believed in it for a moment if one had seen it first in a sketch. Even the railway, on which we soon looked down, was inspired to gymnastic feats, leaping across chasms on giddy viaducts, and twisting back upon itself in corkscrew tunnels. There were thrilling retrospective views away to the giant Alps we were leaving behind, but soon, nearer mountains crowded them out of sight. The country grew wild, with a strange grimness, like the face of a blind Fate; cultivation ceased in despair of success; and alike on the bare uplands and in the deep-scored valleys there were few signs of human life. Then, suddenly, in such a a setting, we came upon the grandest of the Seven Marvels, the most wonderful lone rock in Europe, Mont Aiguille, more like an obelisk of incalcu-

lable immensity than a mountain. Once, it had been considered unscalable, and might have remained virgin until this century of hardy climbers, had not Charles the Eighth had a fancy to hear (not to see!) what was on top. Up went a few of his bravest satellites, hoisting themselves on to the aërial plateau by means of ropes and ladders, and bringing down wondrous tales of impossible chamois, savage, brilliant-coloured birds, and singular vegetation, which stories promptly went into all the geographies of the day and were believed until a more practical explorer named Jean Liotard climbed up, to please himself, in 1834.

We lost sight of this second Dauphiné Marvel (the last one we were to see) just before running up the steep hill which led down again into the dark jaws of another mountain pass. It was the Col de la Croix Haute; and once past this gateway of the Alps the landscape changed slowly and indefinably, here and there suggesting that we were drawing nearer to the south. Though we were still encompassed on every side by mountains, they had lost their Alpine splendour of bearing; they stooped, or poked their chins.

The country was now all brown and green; and, surfeited with beauty, it seemed to me that here was nothing great. We sped through Aspres; through Serres, on its rocky promontory; and on through Laragne, whose ancient inn with the sign of a spider gave a name to the town. Pointed brown-green mountains were crowned with pointed green-brown ruins, hoary after much history-making; and at the pointed mountains' brown-green feet those *avant-courriers* of the South, almond trees, had sat down to rest on their way home.

Still we flew on; but at Sisteron Jack slowed down the motor. Here was something too curious for even spoiled sightseers to pass in a hurry.

The town struggled hardily up one side of a gorge, deep and steep, where the Durance has forced its patient way through a huge barrier of rock whose tilted strata correspond curiously on both sides of the stream. Driving down to the low bridge across the river, we gazed up at the town piled high above our heads, culminating in a fortress which, cut in a dark square out of the sky's turquoise, looked old as the beginning of the world.

Sisteron was brown, too, but not at all green; and beyond, for a time, the country was still in a grim brown study, though it ought to have remembered that it was now laughing Provence. It gave us crumbling châteaux, high-perched ancient rock villages without stint, and even a house (in the strangely named village of Malijai) where Napoleon had lain, early in the Hundred Days; but not a smile or a wild flower. Then, in a flash, its mood changed. The savage land had been tamed by some whispered word of Mother Nature, and grew youthfully pretty under our eyes. The poplars, in their autumn cloaks of gold, fringed the road with flame, and scattered largesse of red copper filings in our path; the dark mountains drew up over their bare shoulders scarfs of crimson, and the sun flung a million diamonds into the wide bed of the Durance.

Night was falling as we drove into the lazy-looking Provençal town of Digne, where all was green and sleepy, at peace with itself and the world at large. Even the beautiful Doric *château d'eau* was green with moss, and the water of its fountain

laughed in sleep; the famous basilica showed grey through green lichen; its wonderful rose window had a green frame of ivy, and the strange, sculptured beasts guarding the door had saddles of green velvet mould.

We slept at Digne, and made an early morning start, the car plunging us almost from the first into scenery which only Gustave Doré could have imagined. Gnome villages and elfin castles clung to slim pinnacles of rock which seemed to swing, like blown branches, against the sky. Wild grey mountains bristled with rocky spines, and trails of scarlet foliage poured like streams of blood down their rough sides, completing the resemblance to fierce, wounded boars.

Our road was a road of steep gradients, leading us through gorges of a grandeur which would have been called appalling when the world was a little younger, and more in awe of savage Nature. If a midge could be provided with a proportionately tiny motor car, and sent coasting at full tilt down a greased corkscrew, from the handle to the sharp end of the screw, the effect would have been somewhat that of our Mercédès leaping down the steep defiles. We were vaguely conscious now and than that a river far below us clamoured for our bones; on one side we had a precipice, on the other a sheer face of towering cliff.

Gorges, glorious gorges! a plethora of gorges. No sooner were we out of one, and drawing breath in a valley of golden sunshine and silver river, but we were back in another majestic cañon. Finest of all, perhaps, was the dark Clou de Rouaine; yet when we sprang out into daylight to throw ourselves into the village of Les Scaffarels, wonders did

not cease. Now we were in the true hinterland of the gay, blue-and-gold Riviera, following the course of the Var, down to Nice, not many miles away. Wide and pebbly in its bed by the bright pleasure town, here it led us through a succession of more gorges, thundered us through rock tunnels, swept us over bridges, and at last tumbled us into sight of a marvel which must throw the whole seven of Dauphiné out of focus. It was the town of Entrevaux, and to my shame I had never heard of it. Where the narrow valley opens into a broad one, and the green, swift flowing river sweeps in a sickle-curve round the base of a high rock, Entrevaux shoots far up into the sky. The river bathes its dark walls, protected by devices dear to the hearts of mediæval Vaubans. Pepper-castor sentry-boxes jut out over the water; a great drawbridge with portcullis, triple gateway, and neat contrivances for pouring oil and molten lead upon besiegers, alone gives access to the town; while behind the old crowded houses a fortified stairway in the rock leads dizzily up to a stronghold clamped upon a towering peak—a peak like a black, giant wine-bottle, slender-necked, with the fort castle for the cork.

"If the Boy could see this with me!" I thought. And then, because this place was like a fairy place, I remembered the fairy prince's ring. Never had I followed his instructions; but I rubbed it now, and wished that the genie of the ring would give me back the Little Pal at Monte Carlo.

After Entrevaux, picturesque Puget-Theniers was an anticlimax; though other fairy towns peered down from high crags and sheer hillsides where they hung by wires caught in spider webs—and though we passed through other gorges of grim

beauty, my thoughts had flown ahead of our swift car. I was glad when at last we came into sight of a fair white city lying on the blue curve of a bay and ringed with green hills, glad that our journey was all but ended; for the fair city was Nice.

CHAPTER XXX

The Day of Suspense

"Will you make me believe that I am not sent for . . . ?
Go to, go to, thou art a foolish fellow!"

—SHAKESPEARE.

FROM Nice to Monte Carlo over the Upper Corniche, was for us a spin of less than two hours; and after that most beautiful drive in the world, we slowed down before the green-shaded loggia of the Royal, early in the afternoon. The hotel was only just open for the season, and it was possible to have a choice of rooms. Jack selected a glass-fronted suite, with a view more beautiful than any other in the extraordinary little principality:

"Magic casements
Opening on the foam of perilous seas
In faëry lands forlorn."

which were, respectively, the harbour, and the rock of Monaco (as old as Hercules), with its ancient towers dark against a sky of pearl.

I was given a peep into Molly's salon, which appeared to be a sort of crystal palace, with its two window-walls curtained by trailing roses; and Jack kept me for a moment at the door.

"I suppose we shall meet for dinner about eight, won't we, no matter what we may all choose to do meanwhile?" said he.

"Well—er—no," I mumbled, feeling a little foolish. "I have—er—a sort of engagement for to-night. I think I mentioned it before."

"What, to meet that missing Boy of yours?" asked Jack, in a chaffing tone, so tactlessly loud that it must have been distinctly audible to the ladies in the adjoining room, the door of which was open. "Isn't that rather a mad idea? You were vaguely engaged to meet your pal, I believe you said, on the night after your arrival, at the Hôtel de Paris, for dinner. But considering the fact that, if you'd walked down as you then intended, instead of motoring, you would have been a fortnight on the way, isn't it fantastic to expect that he'll turn up?"

"Not quite as fantastic as you think," I retorted, remembering the terms of the Boy's letter, which had not been confided to Jack, in their exactness. "Anyhow, I'm going on the off chance."

"You apparently credit the youth with clairvoyance, my dear chap. Supposing he has come down here, how could he know that you'd arrived?"

"I wired him from Digne, telegraphing to the Poste Restante at Monte Carlo, where he would certainly think of enquiring, if he took much interest in my movements. In that message I made it very clear that I should expect him to stick to our bargain, and I have an impression that he will."

"He may. But, look here, my dear fellow,"—Jack now had the decency to lower his voice,—"have you no red blood in your veins? Mercédès—the real Mercédès—nearly restored to health and spirits by her run with us through splendid air and scenery, is to unveil her charms this evening at dinner. You have irreverently nicknamed her the

Perpetual Mushroom. To-night, you will see—but you don't deserve to be told what you will see, if you haven't the curiosity to find out at the first opportunity for yourself."

"Second opportunities, like second thoughts, are better than first," said I. "I shall be delighted to take the second opportunity of meeting Miss Mercédès—by the way, what *is* her other name? You always seemed to take it for granted that I knew; but if it was ever mentioned in the summer, I've forgotten."

"You should be ashamed to admit that you could deliberately and stoically forget a charming young lady's name, and you don't deserve to have your memory jogged. You shall be told the heiress's name when you meet her, and not before."

"I must possess my soul in patience until to-morrow, then," I replied, "for to me one pal in the bush is worth twenty heiresses in the hand, and I am now going out to scour the said bush."

"Which means the Casino, no doubt."

"I shall stroll in, when I've got rid of the dust. The Rooms are the place to come across people."

"All right, gang your ain gait, my son, and I suppose I must wish you luck. Daresay we shall see each other before bedtime."

A few hours later, I was walking down through the gardens, on my way to the Casino. The young grass, sown last month, had already become green velvet, and the flowers were as fresh as if they had been created an hour ago. The air smelled of La France roses and orange blossoms, though I saw neither. Some pretty Austrian girls were walking about in muslin frocks and gauzy hats, though by

this time, in England, women were putting on their fur boas in deference to autumn; and a few days ago I had been lost in a snowstorm on a middle-sized mountain of Savoie.

As I drew near to the big white Casino, strains of music came to me from the terrace, and thinking that the Boy might be there listening to the band, I went through the tunnel and came out on the beautiful flower-decked plateau overhanging the sea. Out of season though it was, a great many people were sitting there, drinking tea or coffee, and listening to "La Paloma."

The windows of the Casino were open, protected by awnings; birds were taking their last flight, before going to bed in some orange or lemon tree. The place was more charming than in the high season; but the face I looked for was not to be seen, and I deserted the Terrace for the Rooms.

I had not been to "Monte" since the Boer war; and when I had gone through the formalities at the Bureau, and entered the first *salle,* it struck me strangely to find everything exactly as I had left it years ago.

The same heavy stillness, emphasised by the continuous chink, chink of gold and silver, and broken only by the announcement of events at different tables: "*Onze, noir, impair et manque*";—"*Rien ne va plus*";—"*Zéro!*"

The same *onze;* the same *rien n'va plus*; the same *zéro* heralded in the same secretly joyous, outwardly apologetic tone, by the croupiers fortunate enough to produce it. The same croupiers too;—(or do croupiers develop a family likeness of face, of voice, of coat, as the years go chinking zeroly on?). The same players, or their *doppelgängers;* the same

pictured nymphs smiling on the ornate walls. But there was no Boy, no Boy's sister; and suddenly it occurred to me that I was foolish to expect him. He was too childlike in appearance to have obtained a ticket of admission to the gambling rooms.

Since it was useless to look for him here, and no other place seemed promising at this hour, there was nothing to do but pass the moments until time to change for dinner. Accordingly I watched the tables. Once, like most men of my age, I had been bitten by the roulette fever and had wrestled with "systems" in their thousands, not so much for the mere "gamble," as for the joy of striving to beat the wily Pascal at his own invention.

In those old days the wheel had been like a populous town for me, inhabited by quaint little people, each living in his own snug house; the Little People of Roulette. Not a number on the board but his face was familiar to me; I would have known him if I had met him in the street. There was sly, thin, dark little Dix, always sneaking up on tiptoe when you did not want him, and popping out behind your back. Business-like, successful, bustling Onze; tactless but honest Douze; treacherous yet fascinating Treize; blundering Seize; graceful, brunette Dix-Sept; and the faithful, friendly Vingtneuf; feminine Rouge; brusque, virile Noir; mean little, underbred Manque, and senile Passe; priggish Pair with his skittish young wife; the Dozens, *nouveaux-riches,* thinking themselves a cut above the humbler Simple Chances in Roulette Society; the upright, unbending Columns; the raffish Chevaux; the excitable Transversales, and the brilliant Carrés, charming on first acquaintance, but fickle as friends; the twin, blind dwarfs, the Coups

des Deux; these and many more, down to the wretched, worried Intermittances, ever in a violent hurry to catch a train but never catching it. I could see them all, still; but I saw them pass with calmness now, for I wanted to find the Boy.

CHAPTER XXXI

The Boy's Sister

" A little thing would make me tell
. . . how much I lack of a man."
—SHAKESPEARE.

THE palace clock over in Monaco was striking eight as I reached the steps of the Hôtel de Paris. Eight had been the hour appointed. Now, here were both the Hour and the Man: but where was the Boy?

I walked into the gay restaurant, with its window-wall, and the long rank of candle-lit tables ready for dinner. Twenty people, perhaps, were dining; but there was no slim figure in short black jacket, Eton collar, and loose silk tie; no curly chestnut head; no blue-star eyes. Cordially disliking everybody present, I marched down the length of the room, and took a corner table, which was laid for four. On the sparkling snow of the damask cloth burned a bonfire of scarlet geraniums, and two red-shaded wax candles, of the kind which the Boy used to call " candles with nostrils," made wavering rose-lights on the white expanse.

I sat down, and an attentive waiter appeared at my elbow, having apparently shot up from the floor like a pantomime demon.

" Monsieur desires dinner for one? " he deferentially enquired.

"I am expecting one or perhaps two friends," I replied. "I will wait for them half an hour. If they do not come by the end of that time, I will dine alone."

"Will Monsieur please to regard the menu?"

"Yes, thanks."

He put it in my hand with an appetizing bow, which would have been almost as good as an *hors d'œuvre* had my mood been appreciative of delicacies. But it was not; neither could I fix my mind upon the ordering of a dinner. My eyes would keep jumping to the glass door at the far end of the room. "I want the best dinner the house can serve," I said, meanly shifting responsibility. "Not too long a dinner, but—oh well, you may tell the chef I depend upon his choice."

"I quite understand, Monsieur. A dinner to please a lady, is it not?"

"Yes. Something to please a lady." Was there not the Boy's sister to be catered for in case she should come? In thinking of him I must not forget her. But then, how improbable it was that my poor dinner would be tasted by either!

"And for wine, Monsieur?"

I ordered at random the brand of champagne which had seemed like nectar to the Boy and me that evening in far away Aosta, when the compact of our friendship was first made. But yes, certainly, it was to be had. And it should in an all little moment be on the ice.

The waiter glided away to make that little moment less, and I was left to measure it and its brothers. One after another they passed. What a pity the moment family is such a large one! I stared at the glass door. Other men's friends came

in by it, but not mine. I glared at the window close to which I sat. The peculiarly theatrical effect of daylight melting into night, as seen at Monte Carlo and nowhere else, added to the sensation of suspense I felt, as when the curtain is about to rise on the crowning act of an exciting play.

The scene out there in the Place was exactly like a setting for the stage. The great white Casino, with the constant *va et vient* to and from the open doorway; the bubbly domes of the fantastically Moorish café across the way; the velvet grass, unnaturally green in the electric light; the flower beds in the garden a mosaic floor of coloured jewels; the air blue as a gauze veil, with diamonds shining through its meshes; and over all a serene arch of hyacinth sky, pulsing with smouldering ashes-of-rose just above the purple line of mountain-tops.

A carriage drove quickly past the window, and stopped, far on at the main door of the hotel. More people for dinner; but not the Boy. I indistinctly saw a tall man and two ladies in long evening cloaks step out; then I turned my eyes elsewhere.

Over on the brightly lighted balcony of the Café de Paris opposite, the "out-of-season" musicians were playing "Sole Mio," and the yearning strains of that simple, hackneyed Italian love song stirred my veins oddly.

The glass door down at the other end of the room opened, and the movement there caught my eyes. A girl came in, alone, and stood still as if looking for someone—her slender white figure, in its long flowing cloak, clearly outlined against a darker background. She was alone, and there was nobody to introduce us, no one to tell me who she was, but the beautiful face was so marvellously like one I

knew, that I jumped up instantly. The Boy's sister! She must have come, with friends, and be looking for him. Then, he was here, or would be!

I have a vague remembrance of treading on several trains as I went to meet her, intending to introduce myself, as her brother had not arrived. The restaurant seemed suddenly to have become a mile long, and she was at the other end of it. So was I, at last, holding out my hand to the white girl with a large black hat, and diamond pins winking in the curly chestnut hair which they held in place.

She was so astonishingly like him! Now that I had come closer, the resemblance was incredible. The hair; the soft oval of the little face; the eyes—the great, star-eyes!

I forgot everything but that one figure, lily-white, and swaying like a lily, as it stood. Luckily, there was no one near to see, or think of us. The diners dined, as if this were an ordinary night, as if there might be other such nights again.

"Who are you?" I said as if in a dream.

A wave of colour swept up from the small, firm chin, to the rings of chestnut hair. "I—why, I'm the Boy's sister," a low voice stammered. "He—sent me. I've a letter from him. My friends are outside. They will be here soon, but I—I came. You are—I suppose you are Man——"

"And I know you are Boy, Boy himself. I mean, he never was—for heaven's sake tell me—but no, I don't need to ask. I've got my Little Pal back again, that's all."

"Oh, if I'd been sure you would guess—if I had known you would talk to me like this, I should not have dared to come."

"SHE WAS SO ASTONISHINGLY LIKE HIM".

1.
8
9

"Yes, you would. For you are brave; and you owed me this."

"I'm ashamed to look you in the face. What must you think of me?"

"Think? I'm past thinking. I'm thanking the gods. If I could think at all it would be of myself, that I was a fool not to—and yet, *was* I a fool? You *were* a boy then. Even the Contessa——"

"Oh, don't! Where can we sit? I must tell you everything—explain everything. I can't wait. In a few minutes Molly and Jack will come."

"Good heavens!"

"Yes. Didn't you guess? I'm the Perpetual Mushroom, — Mercédès — Roy — Laurence. Oh, Man, Man, how *have* I dared everything- l most of all this meeting? To fight that duel w. . have been easier. I think I would never h e ventured after all, I would have stayed a Mushroom always, and let the Boy be buried and forgotten; but Molly wouldn't let me."

"God bless Molly."

I suppose I must have led her to my table, for at this juncture we found ourselves there.

"Will Monsieur have dinner served?" breathed a voice out of the hazy unrealities that shut us two in alone together.

"Dinner by-and-bye," I heard myself murmuring, as one brushes away a buzzing insect. "Yes, —dinner by-and-bye—for four."

"Man," the Girl began; and then was silent.

"Little Pal," I answered, and she visibly gathered courage.

"You know what a great blow I had, and how it made me very ill," she went on. "It was Molly Randolph who persuaded me that a complete change,

and living in the open air—the open air of other countries where no one knew me or my troubles—would cure my heart, and mind, too."

(Oh, what a Molly! What might she not do for this sad, bad, mad old world, if she would but set up for a specialist in the mind and heart line!)

"She didn't help me make the plan that—I finally carried out. You see, she had to be married, and whisked off to England, when she had half finished my cure. One night when I was lying awake, the thought came to me—of a thing I might do. It fascinated me. It wouldn't let me get away from it. At first, it was only a fantastic dream; but it took shape, and reality, till it was able to plead its own cause and argue its own advantages. A girl is handicapped. She can't have adventures; she must have a chaperon. A boy is free. Besides—I wanted to get away from men. As a boy, I could take Molly's advice, and travel, and be a regular gipsy if I liked.

"My hair had been cut short when I was ill. That made me feel as if the thing really was to be. One day I sent out and bought some—some clothes, ready made, and put them on. That settled it, for I was sure no one would ever know me, or the truth. One thing suggested another. I thought of travelling with a caravan—then I changed my mind to donkeys, and that led to Innocentina. I'd gone out with her up into the mountains, donkey-back, every day from Mentone two years ago. She had talked to me about Aosta. Her mother's people came from there. Always since, I had wanted to go. I wrote her. I began to make preparations for a long journey."

"You got the bag!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, that bag! I should have *died* if any English-speaking person had found it, and read my diary, which was to be used—partly—as notes for a book—if I should ever write it. I would have offered even a bigger reward, if you had let me. But I must go on:—they will come—Molly and Jack. I went out to Lucerne, where Innocentina joined me with the donkeys; but it wasn't till we were away in the wilds that—that the Boy appeared. I didn't mean to visit any very big towns afterwards, for it wasn't civilisation I wanted; but—you came into the story, and I did lots of things I hadn't meant to do—because of you, Man."

"And I did lots of things I hadn't meant to do—because of you, Boy."

"It was doing different things from what I planned that worked all the mischief. If we hadn't gone to Aix, we wouldn't have gone up Mont Revard; and if we hadn't gone up Mont Revard, the Prince wouldn't have had to vanish."

"If he hadn't, would the Princess have appeared—for me? Or would she always have been passing—passing—I not dreaming of her presence, though she was by my side?"

"Who can tell? Each event in life seems to be propped up against all the others, like a tower of children's bricks. Anyway, we did go, and Something had sent up to the snowy top of that mountain in Savoie the very last man in the world—except one—I would have chosen to meet. It was—*his* brother—the younger brother of the man I had found out. He wasn't sure of me, I could tell: for he had never seen me with my hair short; and I had

got so thin, and my face so brown; but he suspected, and he is a gossiping sort of fellow. If he had had a chance to see me by daylight, he *would* have been sure, and then there would be some wild story flashing all over America. That is why I ran away. But it hurt me to leave you like that, Man."

"It cut off all my arms and legs, and my head, and left me only a trunk," I murmured.

"I couldn't think what else to do; indeed, I could hardly think at all. But I knew Molly and Jack were going to Chambéry to spend a day, and I thought I might catch them there, if I hurried. You see, Molly and I wrote to each other sometimes, though I never said a word about you. I didn't dream you knew them, until one day you announced things you'd said to Molly in a letter, which—which —well, things which would need a lot of explanation, too difficult for black and white."

"By Jove!" I exclaimed. "Now I know where I'd seen your handwriting before. It was in a letter which Molly dropped almost on my head, from a balcony at Martigny, and there was a photograph——"

"Oh, you didn't see it?"

"That's what Molly asked. I satisfied her that I hadn't."

"Suppose you *had*—before you met me! But never mind. I did find them at Chambéry. They'd just arrived, and I told Molly everything."

"What did she say?"

"Oh, she just lent me some of her clothes, and said they'd take me with them in the automobile, out of danger's way until we could decide on a plan. I bought the thing you call a 'mushroom' in a

shop, and we were starting off next morning when —you came along. Well——"

"Well?"

"Molly and Jack were in a very awkward position: for I had said to Molly that I felt I could never face you again—*never,* anyhow, as the Boy, and that *he* had gone out of your life irrevocably. There I sat in the motor car, and there were you in the street. You can't imagine how I felt. It would have been horrid for them—your best friends—to leave you stranded, and—*I* didn't want that either. I couldn't help feeling there'd be a tremendous fascination in being so near you, with my face hidden, you not knowing, if only the strain of it needn't last too long; and Molly just cut the Gordian knot of the scrape, as she always does. She assured me that being in the same car need commit me to *no* decision as to what I would do in the end. But—you remember how she drew you out, about your feeling for the Boy, how you missed him, and how you were going all the way down to Monte Carlo on the bare chance of his being there? Well, she meant me to hear every word, and I did. After that—after that —I—*couldn't* give you up. I don't believe I could, anyway, when I'd straightened things out in my mind. I'd told you that you would never see the Boy again, and you never will; but Molly said that was no reason why you shouldn't see the Boy's sister. I wrote a note from him to you, for myself to bring to-night, and I thought—I hoped—you might perhaps believe——"

"You couldn't have hoped it," I broke in. "Say that you came to give me back my Little Pal, whom you had stolen from me."

"It may be. I don't know, myself. I couldn't

foresee what would happen. As I heard you say, about motoring down steep hills, I just hurled myself into space, and trusted to Providence."

"Now I understand all that was mysterious in myself," I said. "My heart, not being such a fool as my head, was trying continually to telegraph the truth about the Little Pal to my brain, which couldn't get the message right, as there was far too much electricity flying about in the atmosphere. Now I know why I loved the Boy so dearly, because he was you; because he was that Other Half which every man is always unconsciously looking for, round the world, and hardly ever finds."

"Oh, Man, do you really care—like that? Do you love me—love 'for sure' this time?"

"Sure for this time, and for Eternity. There never really was, there never will be, any other woman in my life except you: for you *are* my Life and my World."

"You don't hate me for my masquerade?"

"Hate you! I'll prove to you whether I——"

"Why does your face look suddenly different, Man? Why do you stop?"

"Because—I've remembered something that I'd forgotten."

"What?"

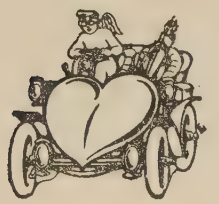
"Your horrible money."

"Don't you think I knew you'd forgotten? Oh, Man, the money would be horrible indeed, if you should let it come between us, but you won't, will you? We belong to each other; your following me here proves it beyond doubt. I've known for weeks that I never truly cared for anyone else, for I love you, and can't do without you."

"Then there's nothing on earth that shall come

between us. Money or no money, what does it matter, after all? Will you finish the journey of Life with me, my Little Pal—my Love?"

The star-eyes answered. And at that moment Molly and Jack came in.



Two Noteworthy Detective Stories by Burton E. Stevenson

That Affair at Elizabeth

12mo. $1.50

Another story in which Lester, the young lawyer, and Godfrey, the reporter, play the part of detectives in unraveling a dramatic modern mystery. A friend and client of Lester's is to be married to a charming girl in Elizabeth, N. J.; the bride-to-be is ready for the noon wedding, when she disappears from her home, leaving no clue as to where she has gone, or why. Her fate is soon connected with a murder; to what purpose the reader is breathless to discover, and is completely surprised when he does find out.

Altho this is a yarn, full of excitement that will make the reader sit up late, it is further marked by interesting characters and no small degree of literary distinction.

The Marathon Mystery

With five scenes in color by Eliot Keen

4th printing. $1.50

This absorbing story of New York and Long Island to-day has been republished in England. Its conclusion is most astonishing.

New York Sun: "Distinctly an interesting story—one of the sort that the reader will not lay down before he goes to bed."

New York Post: "By comparison with the work of Anna Katharine Green . . . it is exceptionally clever . . . told interestingly and well."

New York Tribune: "'The Holladay Case' was a capital story of crime and mystery. In 'The Marathon Mystery' the author is in even firmer command of the trick. He is skillful in keeping his reader in suspense, and every element in it is cunningly adjusted to preserving the mystery inviolate until the end."

Boston Herald: "This is something more than an ordinary detective story. It thrills you and holds your attention to the end. But besides all this the characters are really well drawn and your interest in the plot is enhanced by interest in the people who play their parts therein."

Town and Country: "The mystery defies solution until the end. The final catastrophe is worked out in a highly dramatic manner."

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

"The first great English novel that has appeared in the 20th century."—Lewis Melville in *N. Y. Times Saturday Review*.

Joseph Vance

By WILLIAM DE MORGAN. 4th Printing. $1.75.

A notable novel of life near London in the fifties.

From Mr. Melville's article in the *Times Review:* "It is epic in its conception, magnificent in its presentment. . . . 'Joseph Vance' is a book for laughter and for tears, and for smiles mingled with an occasional sob, that triumph achieved only by the best of humorists. . . . One of the tenderest figures in modern fiction. . . . I write this before the appearance of 'Alice-for-short.' . . . 'Joseph Vance,' in my opinion, is the book not of the last year, but of the last decade; the best thing in fiction since 'Mr. Meredith and Mr. Hardy'; a book that must take its place, by virtue of its tenderness and pathos, its wit and humor, its love of human kind, and its virile characterization, as the first great English novel that has appeared in the twentieth century."

Alice-for-short

By WILLIAM DE MORGAN. 2d Printing. $1.75.

The experiences, some of them decidedly dramatic, of a London waif, the artist who was kind to her, and of his family and friends.

Dial: "'Joseph Vance' was far and away the best novel of the year, and of many years. . . . Mr. De Morgan's second novel proves to be no less remarkable, and equally productive of almost unalloyed delight. . . . The reader is hereby warned that if he skims 'Alice-for-short' it will be to his own serious loss. The cream reaches to the dregs. . . . A story of extraordinary interest. . . . A remarkable example of the art of fiction at its noblest."

N. Y. Times Review: "He is no more afraid to set down the little language of lovers and children and mothers than he is to deal with murder or suicide or ghosts. . . . These two novels of his seem to us to prove not only that the English novel is not dead, but that it is safe to develop on the lines laid down by the old masters."

Henry Holt and Company
Publishers (vi, '07) New York

By MAY SINCLAIR

The Helpmate

12mo. $1.50

The Literary Digest says: "The novels of May Sinclair make waste paper of most of the fiction of a season." This new story, the first written since "The Divine Fire," will strengthen the author's reputation. It has been serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New York Sun* says of an early instalment, "Miss Sinclair's new novel, 'The Helpmate,' is attracting much attention. It is a miniature painting of delicacy and skill, reproducing few characters in a small space, with fine sincerity,—the invalid sister, the man with a past, and the wife with strict convictions. The riddle is to find which one of the women is the helpmate. In the vital situation thus far developed the sister is leading in the race."

As the plot develops the canvass is filled in with other characters as finely drawn. The story grips the reader. Lovers of good literature and of a good story will delight in its development.

The Divine Fire

The story of the regeneration of a London poet and the degeneration of a London critic. 14th printing. $1.50

Mary Moss *in the Atlantic Monthly:* "Certain it is that in all our new fiction I have found nothing worthy to compare with 'The Divine Fire,' nothing even remotely approaching the same class."

Owen Seaman *in Punch, London:* "I find her book the most remarkable that I have read for many years."

Audrey Craven

The story of a pretty little woman with the soul of a spoiled child, who had a fatal fascination for most men. 3rd printing. $1.50

Louisville Courier-Journal: ". . . Hardly inferior to 'The Divine Fire.' . . . Miss Sinclair is probably the most promising artist of the present-day fiction."

Superseded

The story of two highly contrasted teachers in a girl's school. 2nd printing. $1.25

New York Sun: "It makes one wonder if in future years the quiet little English woman may not be recognized as a new Jane Austen."

The Tysons

(MR. AND MRS. NEVILL TYSON)

Boston Herald: "A remarkable story with a strange fascination."

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

Popular Copyright Books

At Moderate Prices

Any of the following titles can be bought of your Bookselle at the price you paid for this volume

NANCY STAIR . . Elinor Macartney Lane
MY LADY OF THE NORTH . . Randall Parrish
THE FUGITIVE BLACKSMITH . Charles D. Stewart
VASHTI . . . . Augusta Evans Wilson
FOR LOVE OR CROWN . Arthur W. Marchmont
UP FROM SLAVERY . Booker T. Washington
THE SEATS OF THE MIGHTY . Gilbert Parker
CAP'N ERI . . . . Joseph C. Lincoln
WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING . Randall Parrish
THE LEAVENWORTH CASE . Anna Katharine Green
MYSTERY TALES . . . Edgar Allan Poe
A COURIER OF FORTUNE . Arthur W. Marchmont
THE QUICKENING . . . Francis Lynde
DOUBLE TROUBLE . . . Herbert Quick
SIR RICHARD CALMADY . . . Lucas Malet
CASTING AWAY OF MRS. LECKS AND MRS. ALESHINE . . Frank R. Stockton
A SPECKLED BIRD . . Augusta Evans Wilson
ORDER NO. II . . . Caroline Abbot Stanley
THE BELLE OF BOWLING GREEN . Amelia E. Barr
SARITA THE CARLIST . Arthur W. Marchmont

A. L. BURT CO., Publishers, 52-58 Duane St., New York

Popular Copyright Books

At Moderate Prices

Any of the following titles can be bought of your Bookseller at the price you paid for this volume

---

THE PRODIGAL SON . . . . . Hall Caine
ADVENTURES OF GERARD . . . A. Conan Doyle
A CAPTAIN IN THE RANKS . George Cary Eggleston
THE DELIVERANCE . . . . . Ellen Glasgow
THE BATTLE GROUND . . . . Ellen Glasgow
THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE . . . Ellen Glasgow
THE MILLIONAIRE BABY . . Anna Katharine Green
THE BRETHREN . . . . . H. Rider Haggard
THE BOSS . . . . . Alfred Henry Lewis
THE PRESIDENT . . . . . Alfred Henry Lewis
BOB, SON OF BATTLE . . . . . Alfred Ollivant
NONE BUT THE BRAVE . . . . Hamblen Sears
THE DARROW ENIGMA . . . . Melvin Severy
THE TWO VANREVELS . . . . Booth Tarkington
THE CIRCLE . . . . . Catharine Cecil Thurston
Author of "THE MASQUERADERS," "THE GAMBLER."
HURRICANE ISLAND . . . H. B. Marriott-Watson
THE LONG NIGHT . . . . . Stanley J. Weyman
INFELICE . . . . . Augusta Evans Wilson
ARMS AND THE WOMAN . . . Harold MacGrath
THE LANE THAT HAD NO TURNING . Gilbert Parker
THE HEART'S HIGHWAY . . . Mary E. Wilkins
TALES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES . . A. Conan Doyle
ROSE OF THE WORLD . . Agnes and Egerton Castle
THAT PRINTER OF UDELL'S . . Harold Bell Wright
IN THE NAME OF A WOMAN . Arthur W. Marchmont
THE QUEEN'S ADVOCATE . . Arthur W. Marchmont
BY SNARE OF LOVE . . . Arthur W. Marchmont
WHEN I WAS CZAR . . . Arthur W. Marchmont

A. L. BURT CO., Publishers, 52-58 Duane St., New York

Popular Copyright Books

At Moderate Prices

Any of the following titles can be bought of your Bookseller at the price you paid for this volume

---

THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN . Booth Tarkington

LIN McLEAN . . . . . Owen Wister

THE PRINCESS PASSES . C. N. & A. M. Williamson

THE MARATHON MYSTERY . Burton Egbert Stevenson

THE HOLLADAY CASE . Burton Egbert Stevenson

MY FRIEND THE CHAUFFEUR, C. N. & A. M. Williamson

CARDIGAN . . . . Robert W. Chambers

. .

PARTNERS OF THE TIDE . Joseph C. Lincoln

EXPLOITS OF BRIGADIER GERARD . A. Conan Doyle

THE MAN FROM RED KEG . . Eugene Thwing

MYSTERY OF JUNE 13th . . Melvin L. Severy

THE SUNSET TRAIL . . Alfred Henry Lewis

THE WOMAN IN THE ALCOVE Anna Katharine Green

THE INDIFFERENCE OF JULIET Grace S. Richmond

THE MISSOURIAN . . . Eugene P. Lyle, Jr.

Good Fiction Worth Reading.

A series of romances containing several of the old favorites in the field of historical fiction, replete with powerful romances of love and diplomacy that excel in thrilling and absorbing interest.

DARNLEY. A Romance of the times of Henry VIII. and Cardinal Wolsey. By G. P. R. James. Cloth, 12mo. with four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

In point of publication, "Darnley" is that work by Mr. James which follows "Richelieu," and, if rumor can be credited, it was owing to the advice and insistence of our own Washington Irving that we are indebted primarily for the story, the young author questioning whether he could properly paint the difference in the characters of the two great cardinals. And it is not surprising that James should have hesitated; he had been eminently successful in giving to the world the portrait of Richelieu as a man, and by attempting a similar task with Wolsey as the theme, was much like tempting fortune. Irving insisted that "Darnley" came naturally in sequence, and this opinion being supported by Sir Walter Scott, the author set about the work.

As a historical romance "Darnley" is a book that can be taken up pleasurably again and again, for there is about it that subtle charm which those who are strangers to the works of G. P. R. James have claimed was only to be imparted by Dumas.

If there was nothing more about the work to attract especial attention, the account of the meeting of the kings on the historic "field of the cloth of gold" would entitle the story to the most favorable consideration of every reader.

There is really but little pure romance in this story, for the author has taken care to imagine love passages only between those whom history has credited with having entertained the tender passion one for another, and he succeeds in making such lovers as all the world must love.

CAPTAIN BRAND, OF THE SCHOONER CENTIPEDE. By Lieut. Henry A. Wise, U. S. N. (Harry Gringo). Cloth, 12mo. with four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

The re-publication of this story will please those lovers of sea yarns who delight in so much of the salty flavor of the ocean as can come through the medium of a printed page, for never has a story of the sea and those "who go down in ships" been written by one more familiar with the scenes depicted.

The one book of this gifted author which is best remembered, and which will be read with pleasure for many years to come, is "Captain Brand," who, as the author states on his title page, was a "pirate of eminence in the West Indies." As a sea story pure and simple, "Captain Brand" has never been excelled, and as a story of piratical life, told without the usual embellishments of blood and thunder, it has no equal.

NICK OF THE WOODS. A story of the Early Settlers of Kentucky. By Robert Montgomery Bird. Cloth, 12mo. with four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

This most popular novel and thrilling story of early frontier life in Kentucky was originally published in the year 1837. The novel, long out of print, had in its day a phenomenal sale, for its realistic presentation of Indian and frontier life in the early days of settlement in the South, narrated in the tale with all the art of a practiced writer. A very charming love romance runs through the story. This new and tasteful edition of "Nick of the Woods" will be certain to make many new admirers for this enchanting story from Dr. Bird's clever and versatile pen.

For sale by all booksellers, or sent postpaid on receipt of price by the publishers, A. L. BURT COMPANY, 52-58 Duane St., New York.

Good Fiction Worth Reading.

A series of romances containing several of the old favorites in the field of historical fiction, replete with powerful romances of love and diplomacy that excel in thrilling and absorbing interest.

A COLONIAL FREE-LANCE. A story of American Colonial Times. By Chauncey C. Hotchkiss. Cloth, 12mo. with four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

A book that appeals to Americans as a vivid picture of Revolutionary scenes. The story is a strong one, a thrilling one. It causes the true American to flush with excitement, to devour chapter after chapter, until the eyes smart, and it fairly smokes with patriotism. The love story is a singularly charming idyl.

THE TOWER OF LONDON. A Historical Romance of the Times of Lady Jane Grey and Mary Tudor. By Wm. Harrison Ainsworth. Cloth, 12mo. with four illustrations by George Cruikshank. Price, $1.00.

This romance of the "Tower of London" depicts the Tower as palace, prison and fortress, with many historical associations. The era is the middle of the sixteenth century.

The story is divided into two parts, one dealing with Lady Jane Grey, and the other with Mary Tudor as Queen, introducing other notable characters of the era. Throughout the story holds the interest of the reader in the midst of intrigue and conspiracy, extending considerably over a half a century.

IN DEFIANCE OF THE KING. A Romance of the American Revolution. By Chauncey C. Hotchkiss. Cloth, 12mo. with four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

Mr. Hotchkiss has etched in burning words a story of Yankee bravery, and true love that thrills from beginning to end, with the spirit of the Revolution. The heart beats quickly, and we feel ourselves taking a part in the exciting scenes described. His whole story is so absorbing that you will sit up far into the night to finish it. As a love romance it is charming.

GARTHOWEN. A story of a Welsh Homestead. By Allen Raine. Cloth, 12mo. with four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

"This is a little idyl of humble life and enduring love, laid bare before us, very real and pure, which in its telling shows us some strong points of Welsh character—the pride, the hasty temper, the quick dying out of wrath. . . . We call this a well-written story, interesting alike through its romance and its glimpses into another life than ours. A delightful and clever picture of Welsh village life. The result is excellent."—Detroit Free Press.

MIFANWY. The story of a Welsh Singer. By Allan Raine. Cloth, 12mo. with four illustrations by J. Watson Davis. Price, $1.00.

"This is a love story, simple, tender and pretty as one would care to read. The action throughout is brisk and pleasing; the characters, it is apparent at once, are as true to life as though the author had known them all personally. Simple in all its situations, the story is worked up in that touching and quaint strain which never grows wearisome, no matter how often the lights and shadows of love are introduced. It rings true, and does not tax the imagination."—Boston Herald.

For sale by all booksellers, or sent postpaid on receipt of price by the publishers, A. L. BURT COMPANY, 52-58 Duane St., New York.